

Hermann Pálsson: Saga Scholarship¹

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IT was an inspired idea to dedicate this annual meeting of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies to the enduring memory of Hermann Pálsson, and to hold it in the David Hume Tower of Edinburgh University.

It was here, nearly 40 years ago, that the first meeting was held to discuss a proposal that 'it would be very useful for to have a purely Scottish branch of the Viking Society for Northern Research'. That was on 14 February 1967. It took nearly two years for this proposal to become reality – well, they were all scholars, after all – 21 months of debate and discussion and good old-fashioned academic argy-bargy. At any rate, a constitution was finally adopted on 14 November 1968; and one of the first committee-members was Hermann Pálsson; he remained a staunch committee member of the Scottish Society for Northern Research, and was President of the Society in the 1970/71 season.

I am proud to be able claim that I was one of his many friends and admirers. And I feel very proud, and humble, to be his *encomiast* for the start the day's proceedings. It's a pleasing word, *encomiast* – one who delivers an *encomium*, which from its Greek derivation means a 'festive panegyric'.

Let me start with a brief sketch of Hermann's early days. He was born in 1921 in the north of Iceland on the farm of Sauðanes á Ásum, near Blönduós on Húnafjörður, the sixth child in a family of twelve. He learned to read and write at the age of three by eavesdropping on

1 Talk given at the Annual Conference of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 19 November 2005.

his elder brothers' lessons, and quickly developed an insatiable passion for books. His father died when Hermann was ten years old, and hard times followed; but Hermann proved himself an able pupil at Akureyri High School, and an academic career beckoned. He earned a *cand. mag.* degree in Icelandic Studies at the University of Iceland in 1947, and then took the unusual step of gaining a B.A. honours degree in Irish Studies at the National University of Ireland in Dublin in 1950. It gave him a significant insight into Celtic influences on Old Norse literature which few specialists in Icelandic could boast at the time.

That autumn, Hermann arrived in Edinburgh as newly-appointed lecturer in Icelandic Studies in the Department of English Language at Edinburgh University, under the benign aegis of Professor Angus McIntosh, the first Forbes professor of English Language and General Linguistics. You doubtless all know that Angus died last month; his obituary in the *Guardian* referred to his 'unsurpassed mix of determination, charm and wit, intellect and vision, scholarship and innovation', as he created and led 'probably the strongest Department of English Language in the world'.

In this pioneering ambience, Hermann set about creating a centre of excellence which became a magnet for students and the envy of many other institutions. In addition to his teaching duties, he continued his researches into Celtic literature; indeed, his first publication was a collection of translations of Irish stories into Icelandic: *Írskar fornsögur*, in 1953. Two years later he published a lively book for the Icelandic general reader on the Gaelic-Norse culture of the Hebrides – *Söngvar frá Suðureyjum*, with numerous translations of Gaelic verse from the Hebrides.

By now he had been promoted to Senior Lecturer; and he had also got married, to Guðrún Þorvarðardóttir – Stella, as she is known to one and all. As Jónas Kristjánsson wrote in a quirky little Preface to the Festschrift produced in Hermann's honour on his 65th birthday in 1986, '*Er það mál manna að með þeim hjónum sé jafnræði um vitsmuni og höfðingjaskap*' – 'People say that the two of them are well matched in intelligence and munificence.'

It was in the 1950s that I began to get to know Hermann properly. There were several young Icelanders in Edinburgh at the

time – mostly transient students at Edinburgh University, but also one or two residents. They used to meet at my parents' home in Lygon Road most weekends; my Dad was the Icelandic Consul-General for Iceland, and our home was a regular Little Iceland where all were welcome. I still remember with great fondness the Barber's Shop quartet of students round the piano, with my sisters at the piano and The Boys belting out 'Annie Laurie' with tireless gusto. My Dad has started a Fund for purchasing any Old Icelandic manuscripts which might come on the market, and would sit in his study talking earnestly with Hermann as to which auctions to target; the manuscripts or early books were then presented to the National Library of Iceland.

The Sagas were always being discussed at home. My father had no pretensions to formal scholarship – but he loved books, especially Icelandic books. And slowly I began to nurture the ambition of translating some of the sagas myself; I was blithely undeterred by my failure to complete a BLitt thesis under the tutelage in Oxford and Copenhagen of Gabriel Turville-Petre and Sigurður Nordal, on the manuscripts of *Fóstbræðra saga*. And being young and brash, I determined to start at the very top. I wrote to the Editor of the Penguin Classics, Dr E V Rieu of blessed memory, and boldly offered him a modern translation of *Njál's Saga*. The *Íslenzk Fornrit* series had just produced a magisterial edition of *Brennu-Njáls saga* by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, and the only available translation at the time was somewhat out-of date: George Webbe Dasent's *The Story of Burnt Njal*, which was nearly 100 years old by then. I could do it, I assured Dr Rieu, in a few months or so.

He replied by return, in the careful spidery handwriting with which I was to become very familiar. He confessed that he had never considered the Icelandic Sagas as candidates for his series, but that I had won him over to the idea. However – a few months? Did I really think so? With great gentleness he wrote, 'Remember, translation should be tackled *con amore*, not *con labore*' – why not take two years? He was quite prepared to wait.

I was working in those days as a feature writer on the old *Scottish Daily Express*, which was still a broadsheet then. I was recently married. The newspaper job was unpredictable and

demanding. But I was desperate to prove my little learning, and I flung myself into the translation with all the fervour of a zealot. It was only when I had completed the first draft, many months later, that I realised that my meagre scholarship had not really been up to the task. So I asked Hermann if he would go over the typescript for me. Being on a newspaper, where every thing had to be done that very day, or overnight at the most, I reckoned that a couple of days would do it ...

Ho, ho, ho. For the best part of a year, Hermann and I toiled together at weekends in his hospitable study over my typescript. It was then that I first came to realise that his help was as invaluable for the English as well as for the Icelandic: Hermann was a living, breathing, walking thesaurus. His command of language, of vocabulary and meaning and connotation, his flair for the *mot juste*, were outstanding. Working with Hermann became an important part of my education. He would urge me always to think of the audience for the translation, and to aim at creating the sort of impact which the original Icelandic audiences of *Njáls saga* had enjoyed.

I was soon to learn that Hermann had been cogitating over this theme for a long time. Eventually it would take shape in one of Hermann's most significant books, in my opinion: *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*, in 1962. Taking as his starting-point the 'saga entertainment' at the celebrated wedding at Reykhólar in 1119, he discussed the role of the sagas in the spiritual and cultural life of intensely rural, pastoral society of Iceland: in effect, how the sagas were used down the centuries. Saga-reading was a unique phenomenon at its height, from the middle of the 13th century until the middle of the 17th century, when saga-reading – 'sagnaskemmtun' – was banned by the Danish king. 'Saga-reading' happened nowhere else in Europe; what's more, according to Hermann's thesis, the sagas were written for that express purpose. The saga-writers were simply supplying a ready market.

In the 1960s, Hermann and I continued translating together, but more sporadically now. *The Vinland Sagas* came out in 1965, then *King Harald's Saga* from *Heimskringla* in 1966, to coincide with the ninth centenary of the Battle of Hastings. Finally we did *Laxdæla Saga*, in 1969.

By now our working partnership had run its course. I had been seduced by the lure of translating Halldór Laxness; while Hermann was turning his attention to questions of toponymy and nomenclature, starting with *Íslensk mannanöfn* in 1960. He was also becoming greatly intrigued by the enigma of *Hrafnkels saga*, a subject to which he would return more than once in his books, starting with *Hrafnkels saga og Freysgyðlingar* in 1962 and *Sidfræði Hrafnkels sögu* in 1966, which he combined into an English publication, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkels Saga*, in 1971.

Hermann was away from his Edinburgh post for much of the 1967-68 session in Canada as Visiting Professor in Old Celtic and Old Icelandic at the University of Toronto. It would be only the first of many excursions to deliver lectures in universities on both sides of the Atlantic, and in Japan.

All the time, however, he was concerning himself with how to enhance the standing of Norse studies in Britain. In 1971 he organised the first International Saga Conference, which was held here at the University of Edinburgh and attended by more than a hundred scholars from all over the world. The central theme of the conference was 'The Icelandic Sagas and Western Literary Tradition', and the underlying purpose was to clarify and elevate the position of the sagas as a subject of university study. It was voted an unqualified success; at the plenary General Meeting at the end of the Conference, Peter Foote paid tribute to Hermann's 'initiative, energy, cheerfulness and efficiency' in organising the conference, and he was presented with three matching silver tankards – large, middling and small, like the best triads of fable – which he greatly treasured. The event was the forerunner to a triennial series of International Saga Conferences held in various countries – Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy and Australia.

Throughout his long career in scholarship, Hermann's most significant work was on the vast medieval literature of Iceland and its relationship to European humanism. He published several books in which he explored this fertile field: he showed that the sagas were not, as many earlier scholars had claimed, a uniquely indigenous flowering of native genius sprouting from the virgin soil of Iceland, but had benefited enormously from influences from abroad – not just

from Ireland but also from mainstream European thinking and literature. He published studies on many of the major prose sagas and Eddaic poems.

He also busied himself with translation, with a new translating partner, his great friend Paul Edwards. Together they completed the 'Big Five' canon, with *Egils saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. But he did not confine his indefatigable efforts to the fashionable 'great' sagas; with Paul Edwards he translated *Orkneyinga saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Gisla saga*, yes, and *Hrafnkels saga*, as well as a number of minor sagas such as *Knyttlinga saga* ('The History of the Kings of Denmark'). He also revived an interest in the late, 'Legendary Sagas', the *Fornaldar sögur* or *lýgisögur* – *Örvar-Odds saga* (subtitled 'A Medieval Novel'), *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (subtitled 'A Viking Romance'), *Bandamanna saga* ('The Confederates') and *Hænsa-Þóris saga* ('Hen-Thorir') and a compendium of *Seven Viking Romances*.

He also provided an immensely useful reference book for students by translating *Landnámabók* (Book of Settlements), Iceland's equivalent of the *Domesday Book* – a twelfth-century compilation of the 440 original Norse settlers of Iceland and their descendants.

These myriad translations made a huge contribution to promoting the Icelandic sagas to the English-speaking world. He gave a sense of coherence and meaning to the whole, massive corpus.

Hermann's later publications included an edition of the thirteenth-century religious poem *Sólarljóð* ('Song of the Sun'), an epic ecstasy by an unnamed visionary monk – a remarkable poem which had not been widely accessible before. Yet another pioneering book was published posthumously: *Grettissaga og íslensk siðmenning* ('*Grettir's Saga* and Icelandic culture'), a study of the cultural influences from abroad, the medieval humanism, which helped to shape the great classical Icelandic sagas.

But there is still much unpublished work stashed away in his book-lined Edinburgh study – especially his verses. Hermann was a magical wordsmith, a poet of no mean ability (although he was never satisfied with his compositions). His wry verses, carefully crafted and shot through with irony and pawky humour, remind me of aspects of Norman McCaig – and there can be no higher praise than that. Indeed, I am delighted to hear from Stella that next year may see the

publication of a selection of his verses, to be entitled *Atvíksorð í þátíð* – ‘Adverbs Past’.

With Hermann’s death, the academic world of Icelandic studies lost one of its most distinguished practitioners. His innumerable friends have lost a steadfast comrade, always ready to help others in their work, and an endlessly entertaining and stimulating companion. For myself, I treasure the privilege of having had the opportunity of working with a scholar who wore his immense erudition so lightly: Hermann the scholar, always thinking, always questing, always exploring ideas; Hermann the teacher, magisterial but unfailingly kindly and inspiring; Hermann the harmonious wordsmith, constantly busy at his diligent forge. He put the literary heritage of Iceland centre-stage in the theatre of our minds, and centre-stage in the arena of medieval European literature

Hermann retired in 1988, but the word ‘retired’ seems alien as applied to Hermann. He had been awarded a personal chair in 1982, and became Professor Emeritus. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Iceland, and an honorary fellowship from the University of Edinburgh. He had his Festschrift in 1986 – entitled *Sagnaskemmtun*, of course.

He had one disappointment in his long and richly fulfilling life – only one. In 1963 he applied for the chair of Icelandic Studies at the University of Iceland. There’s no knowing why he did not get it. But the year before, he had published an impish little booklet, *Lítil samantekt um EÓS* (‘A wee compilation about EÓS’) in 1961, in celebration of the 60th birthday of his mentor, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson. It took the form of a mock-learned dialogue between a Magister and his Discipulus, exploring with pawky irony the happy connection between Einar’s initials (EÓS) and the Greek word for ‘dawn’ (remember Homer’s *rhododaktulos eos* – ‘rosy-fingered dawn’?) and the Old English word for ‘nightingale’. It was a splendid little academic conceit. But perhaps it was regrettable. Under the circumstances Einar Ólafur, who was chairman of the selection board, withdrew, lest there be any suggestion of partiality. And the chair went to someone else. It’s not very usual for an ex-pat, however patriotic, to be summoned home to a top job.

Iceland’s loss was Scotland’s infinite gain. Hermann quickly

swallowed his disappointment and went on to achieve what he had set out to do – to raise the status of Norse studies in Britain. As the Chinese proverb has it, ‘A nation’s treasure lies in its scholars.’

His favourite Icelandic composition, about which he published an important commentary, was the Eddaic poem *Hávamál* (‘The Words of the High One’), a collection of the sayings of Óðinn, chief god of the Norse pantheon. One of the stanzas reads:

Deyr fé,
deyja frændr,
deyr sjálfur ið sama.
En orðstír
deyr aldregi
hveim er sér góðan getur.

[Cattle die,
kinsmen die,
you yourself must one day die;
But one thing never dies –
Word-fame, if truly earned.]

Hermann truly earned his word-fame, and thereby truly earned his immortality. Let Shakespeare, in his play *Henry VIII*, utter his epilogue:

He was a scholar, and a ripe and good one;
exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading.

‘Exceeding wise, fair-spoken, and persuading.’ That’s our Hermann, to a T.