

## Special Papers.

## \*THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCANDINAVIAN LANGUAGES UPON ENGLISH.

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THE authoress of "Robert Elsmere" has said one thing at least, the truth of which every modern student will admit. She calls the comparative instinct "that tool *par excellence* of modern science." It is twenty years or more since Prof. Freeman asserted that the development of the comparative method was the greatest intellectual achievement of our century. That method which found its first application in the study of the classic languages, as related to the Sanskrit, has been extended to every branch of scientific study, and in Germany, the great intellectual workshop of the civilized world, comparative study is almost a synonym for scientific study. We have even seen a professorship of Comparative Religion founded in an American college. The application of this method to the study of literature is, strange to say, the very latest of its victories; it is still stranger that this application should be made by the Antipodeans. The University of Sydney has established a Chair of Modern Literature and a New Zealand Professor has written a book on "Comparative Literature," attempting to explain literary development by scientific principles, and showing how that development has gone along parallel lines with the social development "from clan to national and even world-wide associations and sympathies. (p. 77.)

A less comprehensive but better known work in which there is evidence of how this comparative method has affected the best minds of our time is the "Celtic Literature," of Matthew Arnold. Here we find the great critic endeavoring to analyse the genius of Shakespeare and refer part to his Teutonic, part to his Celtic blood. A marked feature of the best modern histories of literature such as those of Morley and Scherer, is this prominence given to the subject of foreign influence. It is rather curious that, under these circumstances, so little has been done in the way of attempting to trace the connection between the great northern group of Teutonic languages and our own English tongue, while the literary influence has been almost entirely overlooked.

This is all the more extraordinary when we consider that the historical facts regarding the close connection between the early history of England and that of Scandinavia are known to people who would not compare in knowledge with Macaulay's school-boy. For who has not heard that Danish kings ruled England for almost a whole generation and that, for centuries before, the incursions of the Danes had furnished the bulk of the material for the Anglo-Saxon Chroniclers. Probably the best known story in old English history is that of King Alfred and the burnt cakes, and this alone would serve to fix in every mind the fact that the Danes were a living force in England in those early days.

But not only was England north of Watling street almost recolonised by Norse settlers, Scotland and Ireland, too, submitted in part, at least, to the Danish yoke. The best proof of the Norse influence in Ireland is the syllable, *ster*, in the three provinces, Ulster, Munster, and Leinster, which, according to Worsaae, is the Norwegian, *stath'r*, place.

The name of Kilmainham is associated in the minds of Irish antiquarians not with the buried bodies of living Irish patriots but with the exhumed bodies of dead Norwegians, oppressors who made conquests in Ireland long before the days of Strongbow. Indeed, Christ Church, where Strongbow's tomb is still to be seen, was built by the Northmen, and when I saw it over twenty years ago, before its restoration, was said to be the oldest in Dublin. The list of Danish kings of Dublin, given by Lindsay in his "Coinage of Ireland," (*Worsaae*, p. 317) mounts up to thirty-five, and there were other kings of Limerick and Waterford. But these Irish kings must have been very numerous, for who ever met an Irishman that was not descended from one of them. Brian

Boru himself is reported to have married the widow of Aulaf or Olaf, one of these Danish kings of Dublin.

The effect of the Danish and Norwegian conquests in Ireland, as in England, was to prepare the way for the later conquests by the Normans under William and Strongbow. But enough space has been given to the historical facts of the case; it is time to consider the main subject of this paper.

That these historical events should be fruitful in effects upon law, language and literature was to be expected. What was not to be expected is the comparatively slight attention that has been paid to this influence. I was informed by Judge Sylow, of Copenhagen, that the laws of Canute are still studied in the Danish Law School, and that, according to Danish writers, our jury system was borrowed from Denmark. The English authorities, however, no longer admit this claim. Morley has pointed out the evidence given by Earl Godwin, himself, that bulwark of the Saxons. He "bore in his Danish title of jarl, earl instead of the Saxon ealdorman, a mark of the direct strength of Scandinavian influence."

And so passing to language itself every modern English grammar presents us with lists of words and forms. The most familiar and striking example of these is the present indicative plural of our verb "to be." The Norse form, *are*, has entirely ousted the old English *sindon*.

A very interesting local example must have struck many of the English specialists who read the Woman's column of the *Globe*. The fair editress, who is now writing up the Japanese, signed herself *Garth Grafton*. *Garth* is the Danish word for enclosure, and occurs in scores of English proper names. Now when this lady went West her place was taken by another clever anonyma, who adopts the pen-name of *Bel Thistlethwaite*. The *thwaite* in this word is the old Norse, *thveit*,—an isolated piece of land. The best illustration that could be given of the great power of this Danish element in our language is the effect it has had upon three out of the four most wide-spread words in the Indo-European family. Father, mother, sister, brother—all but the last owe their present form to the Danes. This will be readily understood by comparing them, 1st with the old English words and next with the Icelandic or old Norse forms.

|       |        |        |                        |
|-------|--------|--------|------------------------|
| Icel. | Fathir | Mothir | Systir.                |
| Eng.  | Father | Mother | Sister.                |
| A.S.  | Fæder  | Moder  | Sweoster,<br>Sweostor. |

How wonderful and wide-spread must have been this Scandinavian influence when it could so mould the names of our dearest relatives.

Of the Scandinavian languages, Icelandic best represents the speech of England's conquerors, as it has changed very little since the first settlement of the island in 874.

In some of the local old country superstitions the very language used proves that the Northman's mythology has not wholly succumbed to the power of the Christian religion. The state of being "*fey*" is dreaded by Lowlander and Highlander alike. Whence comes this word "*fey*"? We read in the *Edda* how the god, Baldr, whose purity and innocence were the salt that preserved all the other Æsir or gods of Valhalla from destruction, began to be haunted with ill-omened dreams, which threw all Asgard into terror. All soothsaying and explanation ended in this: that Baldr was doomed to die, that he was *feigr*, what the Scots still call "*fey*." But near as Scotland is to the hearts of some of us there is a land that is dearer still.

When I read in the *Toronto Mail*, of yesterday, (Jan. 1st, 1889,) in the Holiday Hodge Podge column: "Many people believe that if their first caller on New Year's Day is a fair-complexioned person, good luck will attend them during the year; if the person be dark-complexioned, however, nothing but trouble may be expected," I was reminded of the undoubted source of this superstition—the belief of the Northman that all the good and happy spirits were fair, while the malignant and unhappy elves were swarthy of hue. So far-reaching is the influence of the old Vikings.

There is another word which Cowper's fashionable dean never mentioned to ears polite, and which has been derived by Norse enthusiasts from Hel the daughter of Loki, whom Odin cast in Niflheim, the Norse Hades, where she had power over nine worlds to share them among the men that were

sent her. This nine-fold division of Hell and the notion that Hell was cold and dark remind us of Dante's division of the Inferno, and his conception of its lowest circle as a bed of solid ice.

But it is not my intention to dwell upon the mythology of the Northmen, interesting as it is. Neither do I intend to trace, any further, the Scandinavian influence upon our language. This has been done in his last work, by Skeat, and although he admits that his treatment is far from exhausting the subject, an essay of purely philological character is for the reader not for the hearer.

The more interesting and at the same time the more novel side of this subject is the Scandinavian influence upon English Literature. And here I will follow the example of our young debaters and define the meaning of my thesis. I propose to investigate the character of the literary influence of Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway upon the literature of England throughout, at all periods of its history from the Epic of Beowulf and the Ruthwell Cross to the last production of one of our Canadian poets. In this wide sweep I can only touch upon the salient points of my subject, but if, in doing so, I awaken a desire on the part of anyone present to carry out a detailed examination of one or more of these authors touched upon, I shall deem the principal object of this paper accomplished.

The method I shall adopt is the historical, but the modern—the living literature of the present century will receive the lion's share of our attention. And first a word or two as to the character of this influence. It may be discerned in the nature of a writer's subjects or it may be found in the character of his style. The latter requires the nicest powers of discrimination while the former admits of a very mechanical treatment. To look over the table of contents of a poet's volume and pick out the subjects that are drawn from Norse mythology, or Norwegian story, requires no great critical skill and may be set as a school-boy's task. But the investigation of a poet's style with a view to determining the nature and extent of his indebtedness to the literature of the land of Thor is one of the most difficult tasks which the critic can set himself. One very obvious difficulty is that of learning three languages—each almost as hard to acquire as German, if taken by itself. This difficulty may be avoided in the present instance by taking advantage of the labors of several distinguished scholars who have given us a series of excellent translations from Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish. If the objection be raised that we cannot catch the spirit of a literature through translations, I should answer that this limitation does not affect the question, as we are estimating the effect of these languages upon English literature and that which is incapable of being expressed in English cannot affect that literature.

The scholars spoken of above are Gudbrand Vigfusson and York Powell, whose great work on the Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue is a perfect mine of Archaic Icelandic literature and who have also edited the later poetry of Snorri, Olaf and Sturla. To William Morris, who more than any other has made England familiar with the Icelandic sagas; Edmund Gosse, who in his "Northern Studies" has given us not only a most interesting account of the literature of Sweden, Norway and Denmark, but a series of exquisite translations of the gems of modern literature in those northern lands; lastly, G. W. Dasent, who has so richly fulfilled the promise of his early article "The Northmen in Iceland," in the Oxford essays for 1858, by the "Fairy Tales of the Northmen" and "Burnt Njal," I am especially indebted. In addition to these writers I have consulted a number of others who have treated the subject of the Norsemen.

When one tries to describe the special characteristics of Scandinavian literature one feels constrained to take refuge in a comparison. As most lovers of literature at the present day are also lovers of music it will simplify matters to say that the character of this literary influence is the same as that of the musical influence to which Kjerulf, and especially Grieg, have so largely contributed. There is a certain simplicity, an absence of ornament, a bareness which is different altogether from the classical severity of the Greeks, but which possesses a charm all its own. There is also a quaintness born in part of this simplicity which is easier to feel than to describe. I shall illustrate my meaning by a pas-

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