

had been brought over from Norway. The *Thing* was, however, less a legislative body for the enactment of laws than a Court for their enforcement. The Icelanders had their District Courts (*Herredstinget*) and their Superior Court (the *Althing*). This *Althing* seems to have been, not only a Court for the settlement of disputes, but a great National Council, possessing legislative functions, and exercising general governing powers. This body met yearly, in the open air, upon the Thingvalla, an extraordinary rock-platform on the borders of Thingvalla Vatn, the largest lake in Iceland, and which platform was surrounded by a deep gorge, with rocky and precipitous sides, except at one part, where an isthmus, of only a few feet in width, afforded access. Every Sandneman in the island made it a point of honour, or duty, to attend this gathering, if possible; for it was looked upon as a disgrace to be absent. Here they assembled with great pomp and parade, and also in great force as to followers, provided there was a probability of some question coming up the discussion of which might possibly end in blows. In these frequent Things, local and general, the Icelanders had abundant opportunities for the cultivation of eloquence. Their style of eloquence, judging from the specimens that have come down to us, was remarkably terse, pithy, and pointed. There was no washy chattering, or waste of words, with them.

Thus we find that, whilst the Norsemen of Iceland were, by natural predilection and the national isolation in which they had placed themselves, led into studious habits and the cultivation of literature, their faculties were being constantly sharpened through the attrition of mind upon mind in their public assemblies and free social intercourse. From all these causes there have arisen these results: that for about four centuries—from, the year 870, when the emigration

from Norway was in full strength, to the year 1261, when Iceland again weakly allowed itself to come under the allegiance of Norway—that wondrous island was, intellectually, the brightest spot in Europe. This period of Iceland's independence is, indeed, a part of that which is especially called 'the Dark Ages.' Whilst every other nation and people in Europe were enclouded in barbarism and ignorance, these Northmen, in their remote island, kept the light of civilization from becoming utterly extinguished,—as their distant, yet nearest, neighbours, the *Irish*, had done at a still earlier period. They alone were learned in the past, as in the present. They were producing poets, epic, lyric, and also satiric—as was found to their sorrow by many of their victims. They carefully collected materials and compiled the histories, not only of themselves and of their immediate ancestors, but of other countries which have since become of note. In fact, nearly all the reliable early-modern history we possess of Northern Europe—say, for the six hundred years from the middle of the seventh to the middle of the thirteenth century—we owe to the literary labours of these Icelanders. Yet were they not a people who much indulged in monastic seclusion, or effeminate self-indulgence. They still retained the ancient bold and manly spirit. They were genially social, although independent and haughty, at home, and still daringly adventurous, to a degree unsurpassed, if even equalled, by any of their contemporaries, when abroad.

The foregoing brief sketch of the character and outline of the history of the Icelandic Northmen has been deemed requisite, inasmuch as it tends to the conclusion that the facts of which we are about to continue the narration were all but inevitable. In making their way from the parent state to Iceland, these bold Northmen had already bridged the widest gulf which interposed between Norway