

Beyond the Northlands: Viking Voyages and the Old Norse Sagas by Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough. Oxford University Press, 2016, 317 pp. ISBN: 978 0 19 870124 8, Hardback, £25.00.

Daniel White*
University College London

120 years ago, William Collingwood set out on a pilgrimage to the farms featured in Iceland's family sagas. His beautifully illustrated book was published in 1899. Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough's *Beyond the Northlands* is a fantastic overview of the Icelandic sagas and the Viking Age, the form of which is best described as a latter-day version of William Collingwood's famous pilgrimage to the saga-steeds of Iceland. Yet, *Beyond the Northlands* is far more ambitious in its scope than Collingwood ever was, as Barraclough systematically covers the whole of the Norse world, chapter-by-chapter.

Barraclough begins with two chapters in lieu of an introduction. The first, a summary of the occidental view of the 'Viking' Other in the Middle Ages, before transitioning into an exposition of the popular stereotypes and counter-stereotypes circulating in Britain today (pp. 11-13). Barraclough then goes on to provide brief histories of the terminology used to describe the Viking Age raiders from Scandinavia and the ways in which the term 'Viking' has been misused and appropriated since the early nineteenth century (pp. 13-22). She argues that this has all resulted in an orientalist mythology building up around the Viking Age leading to a poor understanding of the Viking phenomenon. The alternative, she suggests, is looking to the Icelandic sagas; thereby justifying her second chapter, which covers issues such as the history of Iceland and its role in producing the Norse side of the story (pp. 22-37). This decision to foreground Iceland is very satisfying to see as, too often, the island, which played such a crucial role in producing primary sources, is overlooked. Barraclough's haphazard collection of origins for the sagas, though undoubtedly an attempt to avoid the saga origins debate, reflects the present state of scholarship: thoroughly undecided, and with a balance struck between the somewhat contradictory views of the sagas as either literary constructions, or the culmination of tradition in historical writing (p. 31).

Barraclough then frames the main body of the book using the four points of the compass with three chapters at each point: first North, then West, East, and finally South. This structure is, for the most part, effective, and fortunately it does not have the expected side-effect of geographically isolating her subjects, as she covers in great detail such well-travelled figures as Gudrid (pp. 136, 234), Harald Hardrada (pp. 188-189, 242-256, 280), and Audun with his polar bear (pp. 119-120). *Beyond the Northlands* is littered with references to popular culture, imitating Carlyne Larrington's highly successful use of the pop culture phenomenon *Game of Thrones* to frame northern history in *Winter is Coming* (2016). Barraclough does this for a different end than Larrington, however, who was ultimately attempting to get at the historical roots of the *Game of Thrones* franchise. Barraclough's inclusion of illustrations from *Asterix*, *Noggin the Nog*, and invocation of names such as Hans Christian Anderson, C. S. Lewis, and Phillip Pullman, is an effective reminder of her aim to decolonise our minds of our romantic or stereotypical views of the Norse world (pp. 42-43, 58).

Barraclough ends her book in much the same way as Mikhail Steblin-Kamenskij ends his *Saga Mind* (1973) – an epilogue in which the reader is transported to the present day and the reality of modern perceptions of the Norsemen are juxtaposed with the reality the historian claims to have exposed over

* Daniel White has recently begun his PhD in Scandinavian Studies at University College London. His research looks at medieval Scandinavia with a particular focus on Iceland. He can be contacted at: DMW314@bham.ac.uk.

the course of their book (pp. 277-280). This similarity is something of a metaphor for the major issue with *Beyond the Northlands* as, though highly readable, Barraclough does not bring a particularly new interpretation to the material. With some minor variations, the same content is covered by Robert Ferguson (2009), Anders Winroth (2012 & 2014), John Haywood (2015), and Sverre Bagge (2016); though to the credit of these scholars (barring Haywood), they have framed this content in such a way as to press forward scholarly debate. Haywood, although not advancing debate, does put forward the same sort of outlook as *Beyond the Northlands*: of changing attitudes to the Vikings over time and the perspectives that have come with these shifts. Unlike Barraclough who focuses on the importance of the voyage (both peaceful and violent), Haywood embraces the stereotypically violent side of the Norse voyages, focusing inordinately on that aspect of the Viking Other. This reveals the great strength of *Beyond the Northlands*. Barraclough's fusion of narrative, recent scholarship, personal travel and landscape – an experiential voyage around the Viking world that takes the Norse on their own terms – is what makes this book a fantastic addition to scholarship. As stated at the outset, *Beyond the Northlands* is a pilgrimage, but on a far grander scale.