Richmond, Velma Bourgeois. *Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature* : *Victorian and Edwardian Retellings in Words and Pictures*. McFarland, 2022.

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/nordic-sagas-as-childrens-literature/

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Velma Bourgeois Richmond's *Nordic Sagas as Children Literature: Victorian and Edwardian Retellings in Words and Pictures* (2023) is part of a series of books dedicated to "establish the richness and diversity of Late Victorian and Edwardian children's books that retold literatures of national and ethnic heritage" (1). The title promises to examine the link between Nordic sagas and their numerous revisitations in children's literature. In the introduction, the author writes that her book "establishes an alternative tradition, different in significant ways," (1) and the sheer number of collected texts and variations is ample evidence of her statement.

The book is divided into three parts: "Contexts and Criticisms," "Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature," and "Schoolbooks." Chapter 1, "English Translations," opens with a list of translations into English during the Victorian period and relies on solid academic work such as Andrew Wawn's seminal *The Vikings and the Victorians* (2000) before focusing on several key figures in the translation of Nordic sagas, such as Thomas Percy, Henry Weber (Sir Walter Scott's literary assistant), and Robert Jamieson. It also sets other translators in perspective, such as Samuel Laing, whose translation of *Heimskringla* (1915) became standard and helped to popularize the saga among English readers thanks to its cheap publication by Everyman. Richmond gives a lot of detail but somewhat loses her reader by skipping over genealogical facts about the publication of the various translations and facts about narrative plots. As an example, the story of "The Battle of London Bridge"—an episode in which Olaf Trygveson joins Ethelred to oust the Danes who had fortified it and its illustration by Morris Meredith Wiliams—is mentioned with no reference to its

clearly Pre-Raphaelite inspiration in its resemblance to D. G. Rossetti's medievalist illustrations of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (c. 1470). Richmond's long quotes neither help to piece the narratives together nor support her claim that some of the sagas targeted children rather than adults. Transitions are weak and sometimes far too elliptic. For instance, Richmond writes, "Of one hundred sixty-nine sagas, a few were favored for children. Laing's 'Preface' defined Northmen's dominant role" (19). Is that to say that the stories selected for children showed the masculinity or manly power? Later on, Richmond rightly mentions Mary Howitt's *The Literary and Romance of Northern Europe* (1852) and gives lengthy quotes from the book while giving few useful comments on it.

Additionally, the conclusion to the section is a bit of a letdown: "Mary Howitt, translator of Andersen and Scandinavian novels, writer of poems and books about children, was uniquely qualified" (24). That Howitt's "high sentiment was apt for children" (23) also sounds very dismissive, or at least elusive as Richmond does not really address the question of what we mean by "children's literature" (then and now). Another question inadequately explored in the book is why these British authors decided to translate these texts—in other words what translation means as an intellectual and sometimes as a collaborative endeavor at a practical as well as conceptual level.

A case in point is Richmond's discussion of William Morris and Eiríkir Magnússon's *The Saga Library* (1891). Richmond gives lengthy quotes from individual stories but does not mention the context of the unique collaboration process between the two men (which is beautifully analyzed by Richard L. Harris in his 1975 article, "William Morris, Eiríkir Magnússon, and Iceland: A Survey of Correspondence." More annoyingly, Richmond sometimes jumps to conclusions, for instance when she writes that Magnússon and Morris's translation titles suggested women

stemmed from "Pre-Raphaelite obsession with compelling women" (34). Throughout this first part, Richmond moves from one author to the next in chronological order and concludes by giving an overview of the various editors that kept interest for Nordic sagas alive but she does not interpret their meaning or significance in relation to genre, politics, or just readership.

The next chapter, entitled "British Writers Celebrate the North," goes back in time and examines how ideas of Nordic heritage circulated among Romantic writers, starting with Walter Scott, who is seen as a precursor. Next is a short chapter on Felicia Hemans who is seen as "influential but not 'great'" (48). Unfortunately, the paragraph devoted to her writings is so short that one can barely learn from her mention—especially as she appears "sandwiched" between two prominent male figures, Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle. The next chapters on Carlyle and Bulwer-Lytton are very detailed and descriptive and include overlong quotes from the books with no analysis of the corpus. By comparison, the section dedicated to William Morris with the focus on *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876) is both relevant and stimulating. Similarly, the pages devoted to discussing Henry Rider Haggard's Nordic heritage and sagas and to his friend Rudyard Kipling are fascinating as they show how imagery travelled from one writer to the next, and even from one composer to the next (as Edward Elgar is also mentioned). As one could have expected, J. R. R. Tolkien stands out as a prominent figure as one of the main writers celebrating the North, along with W. H. Auden.

The last chapter in the first part of the book, entitled "American Heritage," is a compendium of American authors who either translated Nordic sagas or offered literary responses to particular themes. This section notably deals with the "Fireside" poets, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his famous *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), or Ralph Waldo Emerson. The section is very informative and mentions the main anthologies of Nordic poems published in the United

States. It also includes a list of authors who translated or reinterpreted well-known sagas, such as James Russell Lowell or Bayard Taylor. Striking here is the affinity between those American figures and British authors and the Nordic heritage they reclaim in their work. The focus on King Olaf (first promoted by Longfellow's celebration of Saint Olaf in "The Musician's Tale") is foregrounded in the writings of many less prominent American writers mentioned in this section, but Richmond seems here to drift away from the core subject of Nordic Sagas as children's literature.

By contrast, Part II: "Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature," (an odd choice as it replicates the book's title), focuses on world collections and is again a compendium of titles that lists authors of world collections in chronological order, interspersed with black and white illustrations. Although erudite, the section is overly descriptive and fails to sustain the reader's interest. The next section on European collections is far more stimulating as it touches on the intersection between literature and didactics. For instance, when Richmond mentions how the founder of Christian socialism, John Ludlow, introduced medieval stories at the Working Men's College and found epic cycles of Norse-German origin more appealing than Arthurian legends, she is clearly onto something. However, she does not really develop her argument and states that "The Norse was alternative to Mediterranean/Catholic South" (153), which sounds rather obvious. Later on, when the author mentions Andrew and Leonora Lang's *The Book of Romance* (1902), she does mention H. J. Ford's color picture (reproduced in the book in black and white, unfortunately) but only comments that it "closely matched verbal text" (165) without identifying its deliberate references to the Italian Renaissance, such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (1486).

The conclusion to Part II is both sketchy and inconclusive. Finally, the last part in the book is divided into two chapters. Chapter 8, "Wide-Ranging Schoolbooks," considers single-volume

world readers, multi-volume graded readers, and publishers' series. Here, Richmond quotes at length reviews of popular collections, such as *The Junior Temple Reader* (1900), which she sets in context (287). Although her observations are accurate, she downplays the nationalistic tone of some of these titles (for instance, *Tales of Our Forefathers: A Literary and Patriotic Reading Book for School* (1909)) through a lack of in-depth analysis. Finally, Chapter 9 considers the Nordic collections, *Classics for the Kansas Schools*, *Collections*, and *Some Favourite Saga*s.

Richmond's *Nordic Sagas as Children's Literature* successfully traces the Nordic saga literary tradition from the Victorian period to today's documentaries and adventure films by providing a massive number of materials that may provide a solid basis for future research on the topic. It does provide an impressive collection of titles and plot summaries for anyone wishing to explore the fascinating world of Nordic sagas. However, in spite of its breadth and the author's industrious effort at collecting data, the book does not account for the persistent attraction of Nordic sagas in English-speaking literature and does not provide any elaborate answers or critical interpretations of the collected texts and pictures.

Work Cited

Harris, Richard L. "William Morris, Eiríkir Magnússon, and Iceland: A Survey of Correspondence. *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 13, no. 3-4, 1975, pp. 119-30.

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