

**W**illiam Ian Miller. *Blood-taking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. 419 pages.

William Miller opens his book with a story from *Sturlunga saga* of the cleric Skæringr Hróaldsson, who had his hand cut off by some Norwegians in Iceland in the late twelfth century and was beheaded a few years later. And he closes it by envisioning himself in Skæringr's footsteps, had he lived in medieval Iceland: "it would have been my luck to have lived as poor Skæring Hróaldsson did, . . . for a while without hand, and finally without head" (308). It may seem that I am playing the part of the executioner here, cutting a hand and the head off an American scholar who ventures into my own cultural heritage using the methods of relatively generalizing social history. It naturally looks strange to a native Icelander to read about such famous saga figures as Þorvaldr Gizurarson in Hruni and Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld as "a certain Thorvald" (146) and "a certain Thormod" (203), and that may well influence my reaction to the book. Anyway, I shall discuss it mainly from the viewpoint of an Icelandic historian and dwell mostly on its use and treatment of the sources.

Before I start the amputation, let me say that Miller has written an impressive book, comprehensive in scope and based on a careful study of the entire corpus of saga literature and the law code, Grágás. It includes an immense number of references to instances which offer information on social life in early Iceland. It also abounds in clever observations. To mention only one of these, what Miller states about genealogy is revealing and exactly to the point: "The most important thing was to be able to get where you wanted to go. No one spurned a distinguished ancestor because of the sex of the links connecting them" (143). Apart from putting one-fifth of the text in notes at the back of the book, the presentation is attractive. Individualized descriptions of the sources and the more general findings of the author are nicely balanced. Skæringr's story

in the Prologue provides occasion to discuss a number of questions which must heighten the interest of many readers. In a chapter on the sources the author presents the text of a short saga, *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*, and analyzes it, which must be a great help to readers who come to the book with a vague idea of what a saga is, or none at all.

The comprehensiveness of the book is certainly its strength, but it is also one of its weaknesses. On one hand, it is too much an in-depth study of individual social ties, customs, and attitudes to be a general social history of what the author calls "Saga Iceland." On the other hand, its approach is too broad to form a coherent thesis. In the Introduction the author starts an interesting discussion about the economy of honor in Icelandic society: "honor was a precious commodity in very short supply. The amount of honor in the Icelandic universe was perceived to be constant at best, and over the long run, it seemed to be diminishing . . . Honor was thus, as a matter of social mathematics, acquired at someone else's expense" (30). When I first read the book I expected this bold assertion, and its many implications, to be the theme of the book. The "Concluding Observations" also indicate that this was the author's aim. But in between, it seems as if the author was distracted by too many other things, like householding patterns and bonds of kinship. (Distraction from the right path of life, by the way, was also the ill fortune of Skæringr Hróaldsson.)

The author reveals his boldness in using the sources mostly in the original language and quoting his own translations of them (xi). I have not found any serious misunderstandings or distortions of the texts, but inaccurate translations of words and phrases can be pointed out:

"He was not very skilled at bearing weapons or in dressing himself" (10); "ósiðvandr at vápnaburði ok klæðnaði," *Sturlunga* says, which refers not to skills, but propriety (*Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnþórgason, and Kristján Eldjárn [Reykjavík: Sturlungu-útgáfan, 1946], 1:246).

"They said . . . that there were many stranded whales" (14) implies that the whales were lying around on the coast. The

original says: “kølluðu vera hvalrétt mikinn” (*Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson [Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934], 5), which A. Margaret Arent has translated better as: “There was frequent stranding of whales” (*The Laxdoela Saga* [Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1964], 4).

“Owing to this great increase in population there was great famine in many districts” (16). “Við þat óx svá mikill mannfjöldi á Íslandi, at þat var mikill óáransauki í mörgum héruðum” (*Hungrvaka*, in *Biskupa sögur*, ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Jón Sigurðsson, vol. 1 [København: Möller, 1858], 71). *Óáran* is hardly more than a bad season, *óáransauki* an increase of that.

“Kitchen” (19) is probably misleading as a translation of “eldhús” in Grágás’ provision on fire insurance (*Grágás efter det arnamagnæanske haandskrift nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen [København: Gyldendal, 1879], 260). The stipulation that a man could choose whether he had his “eldhús” or “skáli” insured, if he owned both, seems to indicate that *eldhús* refers to a house with a function similar to a *skáli*, a hall with an open fire.

“I am able to understand the archbishop’s message” (38) is the translation of Jón Loftsson’s frequently quoted phrase: “heyra má ek erkibiskups boðskap” (*Oddaverja þátr* [Vigfússon and Sigurðsson 283]). *Heyra* does not mean “understand” but simply “hear” or “listen to.”

“*hús skal hjóna fá* — ‘a house shall have a married couple’” (126). Here the author has chosen the meaning *hjón* has in modern Icelandic, not the more likely one that he gives for the word (in the form *hjú[n]*) on page 115: “servants, the entire household membership” (cf. Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, s.v. “hjón”).

The words of Páll Sölvason, after his wife has stabbed Hvamm-Sturla, are surely misinterpreted: “it seems worth mentioning that as it happens things are taking a turn for the better” (158). On the contrary, things were taking a turn for the worse for Páll, and therefore he calls it “*umræðuvert, sem nú hefir í gerzt, at snúa nökkut áleiðis*” [worth discussing — given what has happened — to try and arrange something]

(Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1:110). Páll offers to retreat in his dispute with Böðvar in return for the offence of his wife against Sturla.

Some errors also occur in retellings of texts. Thus the author has misunderstood Kolbeinn Tumason’s command about the lodging of foreign sailors: “*Þat var vili hans, at bændr skyldi eigi taka minni forgift þar í heraði en hann kvað á ok lagði fé við*” (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1:161). Kolbeinn decided on a minimum charge for accomodation under threat of fine, but Miller thinks that he “claimed a portion of the price he ordered the farmers . . . to charge” (25). On page 194 the words *reiði* ‘implements of a ship’ and/or *föng* ‘provisions’ seem to be understood as “animals.” A story in *Sturlunga saga* (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1:266) where the bravery of two herdsmen is contrasted loses its point in Miller’s retelling (32), apparently because one of them, Þorsteinn, Eyjólf’s herdsman, has gone unnoticed by him. The amount “hundrað” is rendered as “100” (277), where it almost certainly refers to a “long hundred,” 120, here as elsewhere in *Sturlunga*.

It is not easy to point out omissions in the extensive collection of instances from the sagas. Still, when the author states that “in the entire saga corpus there is no . . . fratricide” (160), he has left out Ari’s story of Þorvaldr kroppinskeggi, who went to the East Fjords and burned his brother Gunnar to death in his house (*Íslendingabók* chap. 3). Other minor factual errors can be mentioned. For instance, ash trees have not grown in Iceland in historical times, as the author maintains (15). But let us turn to more important subjects.

Any scholar who uses the family sagas as sources for history must face the problem of their truth value. Miller is somewhat hesitant in his attitude to the sagas. In a note on page 318 (45n10) he seems to resort to the “nihilistic” attitude, which might be credited to narratology or postmodernism, that all narratives are fictional anyway. There he refers, without reservation, to Úlfar Bragason’s and Carol Clover’s view that the contemporary sagas are also guided by conventions of style and basically unverifiable. This is a

view which is easy to expound in literary studies but hard to adhere to in historical research, and Miller does not do so. He proceeds with a discussion of the truth value of the sagas and admits that “the family sagas present special problems not as seriously present in the contemporary sagas. There is reason to believe some amount of idealization has occurred in the presentation of the events of the Saga Age” (48). His conclusion in this section is “that the society of the family sagas is the society that the author knew by experience, idealized somewhat to advance his narrative agenda. He presented his own world adjusted in certain ways difficult to pinpoint to reflect the knowledge acquired from his parents’ and grandparents’ generations. To this there might also occasionally be added genuine information preserved from the time in which the narrative is set” (50). Thus the family sagas are applicable as sources about social arrangements from “roughly around the first decades of the twelfth century and continuing through the end of the commonwealth period” (51). And now: “Fortunately some control is provided by *Sturlunga saga*” (50). Still later, after the analysis of *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhogs*, the author offers to his more sceptical readers a weaker and more narratological claim, that “we are at least recovering the world of the sagas *and* the laws,” and he proceeds with a comment of which a more thorough discussion would have aided his book: “a world that, furthermore, has the virtue of looking very much like some worlds that we can prove to have existed and in fact have been carefully studied” (76).

This only shows the author’s difficulties in reaching a conclusion that he finds satisfactory himself. But, on the whole, I find his solution a clever one. Of course we all have serious doubts about the reliability of the sagas, but it is possible to live with these doubts and reach any conclusion based on the sagas with a (usually tacit) reservation about its truth value. Even if we resort to the weaker claim, there seems to be nothing necessarily wrong or futile about studying the social history of a fictional society, documented in medieval narrative.

The author’s use of the law code presents a greater problem. It is his program to

compare law and sagas, to let one of the two types of sources confirm and criticize the other. Sometimes however, he seems to forget his reservations about the validity of the laws, for instance in his discussion of the so-called churchpriests (*kirkjuprestar*), who according to the law were only slightly freer than slaves. Miller publishes half a page of provisions about these priests from the Christian law section of Grágás and concludes: “If slavery was a dead letter by the thirteenth century, its ghost was still stalking about in the Icelandic church” (28). A little later he talks about “the church and . . . its indentured priest” (36) and asserts that the “churchpriest’s education was usually in the hands of the man whom he was schooled to replace” (37). But, firstly, no unfree churchpriest is recognizable in the entire saga corpus, and therefore no one can say how they were “usually” educated. Secondly, even if we believe that the provisions about the churchpriests were more than a plan, conceived by the authors of the Christian law section in the early twelfth century, this is hardly reason to assume that they were still walking around in the thirteenth century.

Miller is of the opinion that the reluctance of scholars to use the family sagas as sources has seriously hindered the progress of social history of early Iceland “since the first decades of this century” (45). This would have been perfectly correct twenty years ago, but it was hardly true in 1990. Miller underestimates the contributions to social history made by both his and my fellow countrymen. He classifies the studies of all American scholars, with the exception of Jenny Jochens and “perhaps” himself, as literary rather than sociological (45n10 [on page 317]). I find it especially strange to see Jesse Byock’s book *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988) listed as a literary study, and I can add that I expected much more discussion of the many similar points already named by Byock in his book.

On Icelandic historiography Miller admits that it “has become more socially oriented” recently, “but has never really broken with the biographical, political, and institutional orientation of the native historical style” (45n10 [on page 318]). To exemplify

this statement he refers to five articles. Four of them were written by myself and Helgi Þorláksson in our long dispute about the power and wealth of Icelandic chieftains and “big” farmers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. (The last article in the dispute, with contributions from both of us, published in *Saga* in 1983, is missing here and from the list of sources also.) The fifth article mentioned by Miller is Helgi Þorláksson’s “Óvelkomin börn?” [Unwelcome children?], *Saga* 24 (1986): 79–120. Whatever may be said about the nature of our articles on power and wealth, I find very little but pure social history in Helgi’s study of the attitude towards children. A much larger source of Miller’s underestimation of social history in Iceland, though, seems to lie in his disregard or ignorance of what has been written about history in this country during the 1980s. His list of secondary literature includes only twenty-three Icelandic titles. In order not to be accused of undue modesty I can mention four articles by myself alone, which I would have expected to find there (not all of them strictly social history, but nonetheless touching on subjects which Miller deals with in his book): “Dyggðir og lestir í þjóðfélagi Íslendingasagna,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 46 (1985): 9–19; “Kenningin um fornt kvenfrelsi á Íslandi,” *Saga* 24 (1986): 45–77; “Siðamat Íslendingasögu,” in *Sturlustefna: Ráðstefna haldin á sjö alda ártíð Sturlu Þórðarsonar sagnaritara, 1984*, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1988), 204–21; “Upphaf þjóðar á Íslandi,” in *Saga og kirkja: Afmælisrit Magnúsar Mús Lárussonar*, ed. Gunnar Karlsson, Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, and Jónas Gíslason (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 1988), 21–32.

This is not because the author has ignored my works more than other scholars’. To mention only a few, he has not used the study of slavery by Anna Agnarsdóttir and Ragnar Árnason (“Þrælahald á þjóðveldisöld,” *Saga* 21 [1983]: 5–26), not Vilhjálmur Árnason’s article on the ethics of the sagas (“Saga og siðferði: Hugleiðingar um túlkun á siðfræði Íslendingasagna,” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 46 [1985]: 21–37), not Ólafía Einarsdóttir’s study of the status of women (“Staða kvenna á þjóðveldisöld: Hugleið-

ingar í ljósi samfélagsgerðar og efnahagskerfis,” *Saga* 22 [1984]: 7–30), not Auður G. Magnúsdóttir’s study of concubinage (“Ástir og völd: Frillulífi á Íslandi á þjóðveldisöld,” *Ný saga* 2 [1988]: 4–12), not Helgi Þorláksson’s review-article of social-historical studies on medieval Iceland (“Að vita sann á sögunum: Hvaða vitneskju geta Íslendingasögurnar veitt um íslenskt þjóðfélag fyrir 1200?,” *Ný saga* 1 [1987]: 87–96), nor his book *Gamlar götur og goðavald* (Reykjavík: Sagnfræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 1989).

Finally, I shall take up briefly the question of whether it was a remarkable characteristic of Saga Iceland that honor was in limited supply. Was it really only possible to gain honor at someone else’s expense, as the author maintains (30)? Miller admits himself that it was possible to settle disputes in such a way that both parties gained honor. But in such cases their honor was funded by the envy of other people (30–31). Now I find it rather difficult to calculate honor in terms of envy, but another aspect is more interesting here. Consider the unlikely possibility that more and more people had started to settle their disputes in a peaceful and generous manner which, according to the sagas, increased honor. The total amount of honor would not increase, because the value of peaceful settlements would diminish as they grew more common. But this is exactly what happens with any status-forming value. If I buy a Renault to replace my Lada, my status increases. But if my neighbour buys a BMW my status diminishes again. Is there any difference between honor and commodities in the way they elevate people’s status?

Gunnar Karlsson