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Gustav Storm's 1899 *Heimskringla* as a Norwegian Nationalist Genesis Narrative

While the construction of national identity in various European nations has been of great interest in the last two decades,¹ the engagement of the Nordic countries in that process has been cited less often in the overview literature. However, considerable attention has lately been given to the topic within Norden,² particularly in Norway.³ For instance, in the Winter 1995 issue of *Scandinavian Studies* (67:1), a flagship essay by John Lindow and Timothy Tangherlini asks: "How do people express their identity? What role does storytelling ... play in the negotiation of identity?"⁴ Edward Said's questions are analo-

¹ See, for instance, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1991); Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1993); Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

² "Norden" is perhaps the most satisfactory and inclusive term for Denmark-Finland-Iceland-Norway-Sweden. "Scandinavia" is sometimes constructed as excluding Finland (for reasons of language) and/or excluding Iceland (for reasons of geography). The reader is referred to the discussion on this topic at the FAQ website: <http://www.lysator.liu.se/nordic/scn/faq21.html#2.1>

³ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Typisk norsk* (Oslo: C. Huitfeldt forlag, 1993) and *Et langt, kaldt land nesten uten mennesker* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1998); Anne Cohen Kiel, ed., *Continuity and Change: Aspects of Contemporary Norway* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1993); Steinar Bryn, *The Americanization of Norwegian Culture* (Diss., University of Minnesota, 1993).

⁴ John Lindow and Timothy Tangherlini, "Nordic Legends and the Questions of

gous: “When did we become ‘a people’? When did we stop being one? Are we in the process of becoming one?”⁵ The answers to these questions, of course, will take the form of a (hi)story. As theorists from Benedict Anderson through Homi Bhabha (1990) and Doris Sommer (1991) have emphasized, it is from such stories that Europe’s new national narratives have been generated over the last few centuries.

This essay will pursue a nineteenth-century case of how a narrative evolved to support the political and social agendas of a newly-(re)emerging nation: Norway. Where other European nations were compelled to construct national character by the conscious invention of folk traditions,⁶ Norway had the almost unique opportunity to recover a fully-fleshed image of its national heritage from earlier national narratives. England’s exponents of nineteenth-century medievalism were forced to engage the legendary (Welsh!) King Arthur to recreate the “English national character” in works like Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. By contrast, Norway had historical documentation of its genuine medieval past as a sovereign nation: the great collection of saga-histories of the kings of Norway compiled by the Icelandic politician and man of letters Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241).⁷ These texts, called *Heimskringla* after the first words of their introduction,⁸ were written in Old

Identity,” *Scandinavian Studies* 67: 1 (Winter 1995): 6.

⁵ Cited in Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 7.

⁶ This is what James Macpherson did with his composed poems of the ancient bard “Ossian,” as well as what the bogus-noble “Sobieski Stuart” brothers did with the introduction of “ancient” clan tartans and setts. See Hugh Trevor-Roper’s essay, “The Highland Tradition of Scotland,” in Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*. It could be argued that Norway had its own – slightly more authentic – Sobieski Stuart, in the person of Hulda Garborg, consolidator of Norwegian regional costume traditions.

⁷ Snorri also includes the Danish and Swedish royal families in his histories, but it is the kings of Norway who take center stage for most of the narrative. As a politically active thirteenth-century Icelander living in the decades immediately prior to Iceland’s annexation by Norway, it was with Norwegian royalty that Snorri had to deal.

⁸ “Kringla heimsins,” meaning “the circles of the world.” Norwegians have subsequently dubbed the book simply “Snorre,” overlooking the author’s numerous

Norse/Old Icelandic, and contained gripping stories about the actual history of the Norwegian nation – the same nation, one could argue, that was seeking to re-imagine itself as a nation-state six-hundred-plus years later, after receiving its independence from Sweden.

To characterize this unique national experiment, this essay will explore how Snorri's *Heimskringla* was used by Norwegian nationalists during the crucial turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and how it continues to play a role in Norway's national self-definition. For, as the fictional student in Kathleen Stokker's first-year Norwegian textbook can still exclaim today, "Lærer, den boka har vi hjemme! Det er masse tegninger av vikinger i den!"⁹ "Den boka," the *Heimskringla* in its nineteenth-century prolifically-illustrated version, offers a romantic vision of past national greatness, with its "masses of vikings." *Heimskringla* is not merely a hero-narrative as the Alamo story is for Texans or the flight of Bonnie Prince Charlie for Scots. It has actually attained a status analogous to the Bible in Norwegian households.¹⁰ Snorri's saga collection thus represents a story that had the potential of becoming the *sine qua non* for nationalist Norwegians of the nineteenth century and beyond. In this article, I will argue that this exemplum of nineteenth-century nation-building has been unjustly overlooked as an image-maker for the national identity of Norwegians up to the present day.

Norway's Need for National Narratives

Norway's nationalism debate is a millennium old, at least, but its recent history reflects precisely the kind of dynamics of decolonization and na-

other celebrated works; the majority of today's Norwegians who have Snorre on the shelf (the volume is a common Lutheran confirmation gift) are probably unaware of the author's nationality, as well.

⁹ "Teacher, we have that book at home! There are masses of drawings of Vikings in it!" Kathleen Stokker and Odd Haddal, *Norske, nordmenn og Norge* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1981): 471.

¹⁰ Although not as frequently in Norwegian-American ones, a situation to which I will return in my conclusion.

tional reinstitution that so much current theory finds of interest. In this, it is set apart from its neighbors in Norden.¹¹

Despite three recent centuries of alternately losing territory to Germany and gaining it back, Denmark is still ruled even today by the same dynasty under which it first became a unified nation in the ninth century, a match between rulers and populace that makes Denmark unique in Europe, perhaps even in the world, and that also makes it an exception to Benedict Anderson's rule: namely, that history and politics usually split rulers and ruled (Anderson 84 ff.). Sweden, by contrast, has achieved dynastic renovation twice since the Middle Ages: in 1521 when Gustav I Vasa threw off Danish rule, and in 1818 when the family of Field Marshall Bernadotte was called to its throne in a constitutional move in the post-Napoleonic era. These established historical and political realities thus made nineteenth-century Denmark and Sweden, although not unaffected, less susceptible than late-blooming Norway and Finland to the enthusiasms of national romanticism.

Not until the mid-nineteenth century did Norwegians and Finns participate avidly in the rediscovery of national cultural icons of the past, with a deliberate eye toward building a future free of foreign overlordship and cultural influence.¹² Finland passed from Swedish to Russian rule in 1809, but did not achieve independence until 1917-1918 in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Norway emerged from Danish rule early in 1814 (its first, brief, era of modern nationalist consciousness) only to be annexed to Sweden later that same year (beginning a second era). In the decades that followed, the Swedish kings allowed to the Norwegians the gradual implementation of their hastily- and hopefully-drafted 1814 constitution; but it was not until 1905 that Norway achieved its longed-for sovereignty and its very own king and queen.¹³

¹¹ A user-friendly introduction to Norwegian history can be found in *History of Norway: From the Ice Age to the Oil Age* by Ivar Libæk and Øivind Stenersen, tr. Joan Fuglesang and Virginia Siger (Oslo: Grøndahl, 1991); for more detail, see Magnus Jensen and Andreas Holmsen, *Norges historie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977).

¹² It can be argued that many Norwegians are still engaged in this enterprise even today. See Eriksen, *Typisk norsk*, chapter 1: "Myten om det homogene Norge."

¹³ The couple was a classic Andersonian dynastic mismatch: Haakon VII [formerly

As Norway labored throughout the nineteenth century to regain its historical identity and a third era of national consciousness, however, it could draw on the memory of a historical past as a sovereign nation (872-1397) for inspiration, while Finland could not. This historical progression gave the nationalist impetus in Norway a shape it did not have in the other Nordic countries.

To be sure, as Benedict Anderson argues, “[i]n the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender” (Anderson 5). As Ernest Renan had already confirmed in 1882: “Nations, in this sense of the term, are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them.”¹⁴ In many ways citizens in Europe have substituted the image of a *nation* in the human emotional space formerly occupied by religion, as they have redefined themselves as having an intangible but all-important something in common. This nation is thus an imaginary construct, which has created an “horizontal comradeship” among citizens (Anderson 7), fueled by narratives which, whether presented as historical or legendary, may or may not have anything to do with real events or the real ancestors of the people who hold them dear. These narratives help a nation be “imagined,” as Anderson puts it, or “invented,” as he cites Ernest Gellner as saying (Anderson 6).

Anderson identifies a series of principal avenues through which a nation can define itself. First, nations are invented through commonalities of culture that can turn into common symbols inspiring national solidarity, such as the (usually empty) Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a secular symbol intended to engender quasi-religious feelings of awe, honor and loyalty (Anderson 9-10). Second, nations are invented through commonalities of language, particularly modern, post-printing-press vernacular languages. Third, a nation’s narratives are often constructed and manicured to conceal mismatches between the common citizens of a nation and their unrelated dynastic rulers (Anderson 83 ff.). Fourth,

Carl, Duke of Holstein-Glücksburg] was a Danish prince, and his wife Maud [Windsor] was an English princess.

¹⁴ Ernst Renan, “What is a Nation?” (trans. Martin Thom), in Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 9.

these national narratives often arise among colonials attempting to break free of their colonizers (Anderson 113 ff.). Finally, these narratives “imagine” or construct commonalities of race or ethnicity which serve to define who is “of our nation” and who is not (Anderson 141 ff.). Norway’s national situation in the nineteenth century played out according to these scripts.

First, Norway could easily be cast as a colony under the rule of foreign powers. In the summer of 1814 Norway, newly released from four hundred years of Danish rule, was poised to make its comeback as a sovereign nation; a constitution was drafted (commonly regarded as the most progressive in Europe to that date) and a king selected (Christian Frederik, a Danish prince). When in a few short months it became clear that Norway must endure “union” again,¹⁵ this time with Sweden, a popular resentment began to brew rivaling that of the most oppressed imperial colony. In 1829 the Swedish king ordered troops to fire into an assembly of civilians in Oslo celebrating Constitution Day (May 17), resulting in what became known as “Torvslaget” (The Marketplace Battle), and thereby giving Norwegian nationalists their own small-scale Boston Massacre or Battle of Culloden, complete with martyrs. The nation of Norway would have to be imagined as liberated from such dependency.

Second, Norway was an ethnically amorphous nation in need of a unifying narrative to define its community. Its minority populations consisted of diverse groups such as Sami (Lapps) in the north and “gypsies” (Rom) and “tater” (traveling tinker bands) throughout. Its majority population was hardly demonstrably ethnically different from that of Sweden or Denmark; its religious and educational institutions had looked to Denmark for centuries. In consequence, two questions -- What differentiated a unified “Norwegian” identity from a more general “Nordic” one, and was such a differentiation necessary? -- thus inevitably confronted mid-century Norwegian persons of letters who dreamed

¹⁵ The word still carries considerable negative valence in today’s Norway, which is one of the reasons for Norway’s continual rejection of membership in the European Union.

of national independence for Norway. Further evidence was the celebrated “kulturstrid” (culture war) which raged throughout the 1840s between the partisans of Norway’s two leading romantic poets: the pro-Danish Johan Sebastian Welhaven and the fiercely Norwegian Henrik Wergeland.

As mentioned above, Norway’s thorny dynastic situation was also the kind of ideological and political dilemma that Anderson highlights: a mismatch between the nation and its ruler, but in this case, one that could be rewritten as a rectification. When the occasion actually arose, or seemed to arise, for re-creating a Norwegian royal dynasty in 1814, Norway turned to the Danish royal house; it would again in 1905. Imperfect though this option may have been, it was still deemed the best that could be managed. Just as England’s Hanoverians became Windsors, the head of the new “Norwegian” dynasty in 1905 changed his name (Carl to Haakon), which has obscured this mismatch to this day.

Moreover, nineteenth-century Norway was granted a quasi-religious symbol for its political struggle: “Syttende mai,” in memory of May 17, 1814, the day of the completion of the constitution, and (after 1829) also the day of the marketplace martyrs. Its celebration was promoted by many, including the poet Henrik Wergeland, himself the son of a constitutional delegate. Even today, May 17 parade participants in Oslo are expected to call out “Hurra for den mannen som innstifta da’n” (“Hurray for the man who founded this day”) when they pass Wergeland’s statue on Karl Johansgate. Note that 17 May only saw the completion of a constitution, not its implementation: the Swedish kings only allowed the constitution to go into effect in piecemeal fashion, so that, for instance, the Storting (parliament) was allowed to meet beginning in 1814, but did not rule until 1884. May 17 thus became a feast day without much to celebrate except the fervent belief in a nation that was actively under creation on what we would identify as modern terms.¹⁶

Norway’s most significant investment in defining its national identity

¹⁶ Note that this holiday also came to the United States with the Norwegians who settled in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest, as well.

resembled mid-nineteenth-century initiatives in other European nations: Norwegian philologists and folklorists labored at “recovering” a Norwegian cultural identity in the mid-nineteenth century. Scholars, emulating the Brothers Grimm, roamed the length and breadth of Norway in search of dialect samples (most notably Ivar Aasen), traditional folk tales (Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe), and traditional ballads (Magnus Landstad, followed by others) in the Percy, Burns and Scott mode.¹⁷

That investigation of dialects was particularly problematic, given that Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are all descendants of the common Norse language of the Viking Age,¹⁸ and even today remain for the most part mutually intelligible. While these three dialects vary among themselves far less than the dialects of Arabic or Chinese do, for instance, politics and history have misleadingly called them “languages.” It is perhaps this very similarity among the three languages that fueled the fierce need of mid-nineteenth-century Norwegian nationalists (whose education and baptismal certificate would have been in Danish) to recover “their own” language. To bolster this case, for example, urbanite poet Henrik Wergeland deliberately chose for his poetry unique Norwegian words (specifically, words nonexistent or uncommon in Danish). By contrast, his more moderate colleague Johan Sebastian Welhaven, although a nationalist himself, aimed at a literary Norwegian with specific roots in Denmark, which he saw as the mother-country culturally – a “Dano-Norwegian” heritage. (Not surprisingly, today’s Norway honors Wergeland far over Welhaven, despite their similar poetic gifts.)

Ultimately, linguist Ivar Aasen proposed the reconstruction of the true national language by mining the unwritten, un-urbanized utterances of farmers from isolated mountain valleys. Since they spoke dialects little changed through time, they were thus deemed unadulterated by the

¹⁷ The narrative ballads of Scandinavia constitute an analogous corpus to the more internationally celebrated ones of the Scottish border, to which they are closely related.

¹⁸ Commonly constructed as spanning from the late eighth to the middle eleventh century.

language of the oppressors. Aasen's greatest dilemmas arose later as he attempted to stitch the pieces together into a unified whole: *Landsmaal* (National Speech), as he called it, later to be called *Nynorsk* (New Norwegian). How could he standardize and unify dozens of speech modes from as many geographically isolated locales, which in many cases *differed more from each other* than they individually might from standard Swedish or standard Danish?¹⁹ The situation got even more complicated when Aasen's proposed unified language needed to be defended against (not unsubstantiated) charges that it favored Aasen's own mother dialect (that of Sunnmøre, in the west). The language debate gave Norway a "national language" in an unforeseen way. Norway has continued to this day to have two official languages, both designated as Norwegian: *Bokmål* (formerly called *Riksmål*), derived from the usages favored by Wergeland; and Aasen's *Nynorsk*. Individual dialects, now including urban ones, continue to be encouraged in today's Norway for spoken expression; written expression is expected to be in either of the two standard forms, one of which each Norwegian student must select as his or her "main language" (*hovedmål*) while also attempting a lesser mastery of the selected "secondary language" (*sidemål*).

Norway thus confronted the evolution of its national identity in many of the ways used by other western European nations. Yet we can see how the story took on a more complicated face when we turn away from the markers used to define a *nation*, and toward the cultural politics of those namings within such an ethnically and culturally closely-knit (and hence almost undistinguishable) region.

Norwegian Narratives: History and Fiction

What sets Norway apart from Anderson's other test cases are the strategies used to play off its Norwegian self-identification against the rest of Norden. When mid-nineteenth-century Norwegian scholars and patriots

¹⁹ Many non-Norwegian observers have noted this to this day, but it is substantiated in Eriksen, "Myten um det homogene Norge."

defined who was “of our nation” and who was not, they could not strictly use the same kind of ethnic criteria that so many other European nations did (Anderson 141 ff.). A Norwegian is neither a Dane nor a Swede; but they are clearly all Scandinavians, and cannot construct each other as “other” in the same way that the British and the Hindus can.

The most effective tactics used to construct a Norwegian national image resembled those used in constructing the Scots, Irish and Welsh as non-Anglo-Saxon Celts, which pointed specifically to cultural markers rather than to the racial or ethnic ones at use in Imperial Europe. Norwegian nationalists supported their case for a separate culture by establishing Norway as an independent fount of folk tradition, as Asbjørnsen and Moe’s *Eventyrene* and Landstad’s ballad collection could show. To foster that independence, they also claimed a separate tradition of higher learning, leading to the establishment of a native Norwegian university in Christiania in 1811. No longer did one have to go abroad (specifically to Copenhagen, in the case of the university) to become an educated member of the nation; one could be born and raised “Norwegian” instead of “Dano-Norwegian” or “Scandinavian.”

The historical situation of Norway through the nineteenth century thus paralleled that of other European nations in its quest to establish an independent national identity. Where it differed was in its claim to not necessarily an independent ethnicity, but to an independent cultural tradition. In very much the nationalist tradition reaching back to Herder, they adduced the additional claim that the unique ruggedness of Norway’s terrain (compared to Sweden’s or Denmark’s)²⁰ had somehow

²⁰ Norwegians are fond of pointing out the geological similarities between their “værbitte” land (“weather-beaten” – the term comes from Bjørnson’s national anthem text), and the highlands of Scotland, an area perhaps more renowned in international cliché as the breeding –ground of the kind of tough rustics of integrity that many Norwegians – including urban ones – would like to construct themselves as. Similarly, as Eriksen suggests, Norwegians love to tell jokes about “Danish mountains,” partially because the implied subtext is that the Danes, lacking environmental challenges, are therefore lacking in character – partially because the Danes’ longer and fuller cultural history makes Norwegians feel intimidated. See “Nasjonalt identitet – et ufullendt prosjekt,” in *Typisk norsk*, 1993 (page 9 of the

produced (in Lamarckian fashion) an independent strain of stoic individualists -- a claim that can be traced in nineteenth-century novelists as diverse as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (celebrator of southern peasantry) and Jonas Lie (celebrator of northern fisher-folk).

In addition, Norwegians could easily claim to be concerned not simply with the *invention* of their nation, but also with what could more easily be termed its *re-invention* or re-discovery. After all, the memory of the medieval kingdom of Norway was much more tangible, and hence approachable, than the more distant (because legendary) Cochobor's Ulster or Arthur's Wales. As it would appear in the stories Norwegians told themselves, that "imagined" but real Norway was a once-sovereign kingdom looking to become one again — this time in the modern mode, incorporating the parliamentary checks on royal power proposed in the constitution of 1814, finally implemented in the 1880s and 1890s.

The foundation had thus been laid to tell a credible story of Norway as an independent culture within Scandinavia. Even many of the institutional desiderata to guarantee the correlation between lived practice and the nation's self-image were in place by the mid-nineteenth century. Yet it took until the end of the century for the epitomal national narrative to be dusted off and repackaged for the masses: for Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* to emerge from among many medieval chronicles as the one cultural narrative that could satisfy all these desiderata for national self-definition.

The story-text best suited to Norway's needs had to be different from those which served other nations that were beginning to emerge from colonial domination. For example, Doris Sommer, in *Foundational Fictions*, examines the nationalist narratives of emerging independent Latin America as they took form in nineteenth-century Latin American popular romance novels. Most of these are derived at some remove from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, and thus feature plots in which lovers of different races bravely strive against opposition to thrive in a new and untouched land, to establish new nations incor-

porating both the gifts of culture and the bounty of nature. Such scripts for national mythmaking were instrumental in legitimizing nations as foci of loyalty in the face of the less pleasant actual historical facts, often involving the slaughter, rape and slavery of indigenous peoples, and the exploitation of the wilderness.

Norwegians' needs for a national script (a new mental symbolic space to guide Norway's independent development) were clearly different. Norway was hardly virgin territory; its inhabitants had acted as part of Europe for centuries, and there were well-documented narratives from earlier ages available. Maybe more crucially, Norwegians were not transacting ethnic or religious changes when they broke off from Denmark and Sweden. Instead, even when they broke off, Norwegians continued to occupy what had long been defined as a coherent political and geographical entity. Norway's earlier political status had been subservient, but that dependent status had not proved itself morally questionable to the degree found in so many of the countries of the colonized New World. Therefore, when individual Norwegians had to re-orient their thinking toward an independent Norwegian nation, they were, to a large part, not forced to renounce earlier dimensions of their self-definitions: they were still Scandinavians of some sort, their religious and cultural traditions were largely continuous and intact, and they had full scripts available in their own history that could guide their political and cultural evolution in the future. (There was no "alternate history" wiped out by the oppressors.)

Turn-of-the-century Norway, therefore, was able to celebrate not decolonization, but independence, an image of progressive self-affirmation, fortified by almost a century of prior efforts on the part of such Norwegian nationalists as the Eidsvoll delegates who framed the constitution, and the folklorists and philologists outlined above. In consequence, Norwegians undergoing political redefinition were little subject to the kinds of psychological reorientation described, for instance, in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952) by the psychiatrist Frantz Fanon for post-colonial Africa. The Norwegian national myth – the "Norwegian imaginary" – could focus on what it might mean to be a Norwegian citizen in a sovereign, independent Norway, "et Rige, og det udelelig"

(“one kingdom, indivisible”), as paragraph I of the 1814 constitution had stated.

Note that close parallels to Norway’s nationalist narrative may be found in the cases of Finland and Ireland, both of which were struggling towards independence at the same time as Norway. Narratives, specifically reconstructed narratives out of the past, became significant factors for both nations. Elias Lönnrot collected Karelian folk verse, reconciled discrepancies between its heroic cycles, and wrote transitional passages, thereby generating what became the *Kalevala*. Some decades later William Butler Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory, and others rescued and retold in modern language the tales of Cú Chulainn and other heroes out of pre-Christian Ireland. In each case, the rescued legendary narrative provided essential metaphor and inspiration for the birth of the modern national myth -- not to mention the nation itself. However, there are two significant differences between Norway’s case and its national narrative needs, and those of Finland or Ireland. First, as noted above, Norway’s task of identifying itself and its inhabitants as independent from the foreign ruling power, whether Denmark or Sweden, was a more subtle one than Finland’s vis-à-vis Russia or Ireland’s vis-à-vis England, since there was greater overlap between the cultures, religion, and languages of the colonized and colonizers.

Moreover, although fairy-tales, and larger-than-life ballad heroes such as Åsmund Frægdegjæva (not dissimilar from the Finnish Lemminkäinen or the Irish Cú Chulainn or Finn MacCoul) were certainly significant in Norwegian national mythmaking, Norway also had a *real, historical* past as a sovereign nation available for inspirational use, one without ignominious defeats or retreats in it, except perhaps for the inevitable one in the face of the Black Death. Norway’s past had been written, at least in part, as a history of winners, rather than losers -- prior to 1350.

What was at issue in the last decades of the nineteenth century, then, was a more specific self-definition over against Denmark and Sweden. Norway needed scripts which informed what modern Norwegians -- but not Danes or Swedes -- were specifically made of. There were already literary narratives in place from the mid-century romantics and

their followers showing that Norwegians could be appreciators of beautiful nature and devoted worshippers of their God;²¹ folk and literary narratives that showed Norwegians as resourceful and clever, though sometimes morally ambiguous, individualists;²² and/or literary narratives showing Norwegians as honest, hard-working peasants.²³

That emerging self-definition found its official story in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, which was an intriguing selection from the comparatively large corpus of prose fiction, poetry, and historical material preserved in Iceland from the Scandinavian Middle Ages. The historical Snorri Sturluson (1178-1241), for instance, had had at best a conflicted interaction with the crown of Norway, which in Snorri's time was a contested possession. But *Heimskringla* as written seems largely pro-Norwegian; at least part of Snorri's motivation in compiling and editing this set of chronicles must have been to curry favor with its heroes' real-life descendants. Snorri's final product was a story presenting its largely heroic Norwegian royal protagonists parading through the centuries effectively killing off their enemies on land and sea -- the nobles of that very nation which was at that moment preparing to absorb the three-hundred-year-old independent Icelandic republic, which by Snorri's time was split by factions and racked by civil war.

Snorri's panegyric was not completely successful. Towards the end of his life, Snorri was unlucky enough to have supported the wrong candidate (Duke Skúli) for king of Norway, with the result that orders came to Iceland in 1241 from the winning candidate, Hákon Hákonarson, to have Snorri killed. Although Snorri's personal charisma was said to have been considerable, such that his executioners may have actually hesitated a moment or two upon hearing his dying appeal, "Eigi skal höggva" ("Do not chop!"), he had no chance against such a figure as Hákon. There may have been some question about Snorri's unequivocal

²¹ For instance: Henrik Wergeland's mid-century poem "Eivindvig."

²² For instance: Asbjørnsen and Moe's *Eventyrene* (1842-44); Henrik Ibsen's anti-romantic play with folklore roots, *Peer Gynt* (1867).

²³ For instance: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's novels *Synnøve Solbakken* (1857) and *En glad Gut* (1860).

support for the Norwegian crown, to be sure. If we read *Heimskringla* in the original Old Norse with Snorri's impending end in mind, we can sense possible points of irreverence in the text which the author / compiler may well have selected with purpose.²⁴

Although *Heimskringla* had been largely forgotten outside of Iceland in the centuries after its writing, some rare modernized versions edited by Danish and Swedish antiquarians were available in libraries for the use of Norwegian national romantics by the mid-nineteenth century. In consequence, Norway's *fin-de-siècle* persons of letters were in the position to believe that Snorri Sturluson's royal chronicles were, or could become, the wished-for complete narrative of Norway's grand past. *Heimskringla* became the book of the new Norway, when it debuted in the newly translated, newly and copiously illustrated editions of 1899-1900, which are the direct ancestors of the identically-illustrated editions, "med masse vikinger i dem," that sit on Norwegian bookshelves today.

Norwegians and Vikings: The Translations, Illustrations, and Their Stereotypes

Snorri's history had already attracted attention as a possible bearer of national pride at mid-century, some decades before its great success. Constitutional delegate and historian Jacob Aall had produced a three-volume translation of *Heimskringla* that came out in 1838 and 1839. Aall was probably acquainted with at least previous editions, including those of Ole Worm (1588-1654) in Denmark, Johan Peringskiöld (1654-1720) in Sweden, and N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) in Denmark. Aall most

²⁴ Consider the account from the battle of Svöldr in the saga of Olaf Tryggvason, when the king's archer's bow breaks: "What was that cracking noise?" "Norway from your hand, O king!" – which may anticipate a known farting anecdote (alas, not included by Snorri) from later in the same archer's life. See Kari Ellen Gade, "Einarr Thambarskelfir's Last Shot," in *Scandinavian Studies* 67:2 (Spring 1995), 153-161; and Anatoly Liberman, "Gone with the Wind: Some Thoughts on Medieval Farting," in *Scandinavian Studies* 68:1 (Winter 1996), 98-104.

definitely knew Grundtvig's Danish version, which he found artfully rendered, but "neppe passende for menig Mand i Norge" (hardly suitable for the ordinary Norwegian). It was Aall's intent to reproduce Snorri's "verdige og simple Sprog" ("dignified and simple language") such that the common person could read it. Because of this belief that his new version of the book would speak to the average Norwegian, Aall even subsidized the printing himself, to cut down the purchase price. However, as Gustav Storm noted in the foreword of his 1899 translation, the Aall edition was in point of fact not rendered fortuitously enough to appeal to its intended audience, and it never became the "folkebog" (folk-book, book of the people) its translator had meant it to be.²⁵

Aall was not the only one to notice *Heimskringla*'s potential as a national epic in that first, mid-century era of Norwegian national romanticism. The historian P. A. Munch had begun a translation of his own before Aall's edition came out; he picked it up again ten years later and completed the translation for publication in 1859. This edition resonated with the public enough that it was reprinted in Chicago thirty-plus years after that, in 1896-98.²⁶ I would not claim this late reprinting to be a guarantor of Munch's qualities as a translator, even though his prose style is manifestly more readable than Aall's. Rather, I expect that this lag indicates how long it typically took new material from Norway to reach the emigrant community -- and probably outside of copyright limitations.

In any case, the stage was set in the minds of scholars for a definitive and successful popular edition of Snorri's chronicles. That hope came to fruition right in the middle of an era of interest in the Viking age specifically, as will be made clear below. The amount of energy devoted by Norwegians at the turn of the nineteenth century to medieval- and Viking-related projects testifies to the importance of those eras in the

²⁵ Aall's remarks on Grundtvig, and the fate of his own translation, are noted in the foreword of the 1899 Gustav Storm edition: Snorre Sturlason, *Kongesagaer* (Christiania: J. M. Stenersen & Co. Forlag, 1900): xlii-xliv.

²⁶ *Kongesaaer*, xlv.

scholarly and popular minds of that era.

In 1896, the Christiania publisher J. M. Stenersen conceived of a popular illustrated edition. Historian Gustav Storm, who some years before had written a critical study on Snorri as a historian (Copenhagen, 1873), was to be its translator into *Riksmaal*. He was not a literary man, but a person who could produce a “historically correct” edition. Steinar Schjøtt, also a historian as well as a linguist and travel writer, was selected to produce the *Landsmaal* version. Investing in translations in both “national” dialects was an inclusive and canny move: the book was meant to become the common property of *all* of Norway, rather than a regional favorite.

To render Storm’s and Schjøtt’s scholarship attractive for the popular reader, four prominent artists were contracted to make pen-and-ink drawings for both editions. All of these artists had been born during the prior national-romantic craze at mid-century, had studied abroad in Munich or Paris, and were now at the peak of their fame as well-known figures in the art circles of Christiania. Christian Krohg (1852-1925), already well-known for social realism in both fiction and painting through his recent novel of Albertine the Christiania prostitute, with its accompanying art, was probably deemed worthy for the Snorri project because of his 1893 painting of Leif Eriksson sighting America. Erik Werenskiöld (1855-1938), Eilif Peterssen (1852-1928), and Gerhard Munthe (1849-1929) were already celebrated for their fairy-tale and folk-art images.²⁷ When Peterssen left for the continent in the late 1890s, his portion of the contract went to the young Halfdan Egedius (1877-1899), who was a whole generation younger than the other artists but had already produced a series of celebrated oils celebrating life in rural Setesdal. Egedius drew a number of illustrations for the book, including some of the most memorable ones the book contains,²⁸ before he died

²⁷ Werenskiöld and Peterssen’s art adorns many of Asbjørnsen and Moe’s *eventyr* even in today’s editions. Gerhard Munthe, who was in many ways the William Morris of Norway, contributed his design skills not only to painting, but to many medieval-inspired textile and furniture designs which anticipate Art Deco. See Lorentz Dietrichson, *Norges kunsts historie i det nittende århundre* (Oslo: Messel, 1991).

²⁸ For instance: the death of the wizards on the rocks; the oath of the Jomsvikings.

untimely (at age 21!) from a systemic fungus infection.²⁹ Following his death, Wilhelm Wetlesen was given the task of finishing those illustrations which were still incomplete.³⁰

The first edition of the completed book came out in 1899 and was immediately recognized as an important cultural monument. On May 12, 1900, the *Storting* approved a subsidy of 20,000 kroner for a second, more affordable edition, a “nationaludgave” (national edition). The appearance of this second edition highlights the politics of language at that time. The price, depending on binding, was between 1.9 and 3 kroner. Seventy thousand copies were printed at that time of Storm’s *Bogmaal* (today: *bokmål*) translation; of Schøtt’s *Landsmaal* (today: *nynorsk*) text, presumably thirty thousand.³¹

In this incarnation, supported by the cultural politics of the state in this way, the book finally was destined to achieve the popular status Jacob Aall had wished for decades before. What Norwegians tend to own nowadays is this very 1899-1900 edition or a lookalike descendant. Storm’s text has been modernized twice, some decades ago by Anne Holtsmark and Didrik Arup Seip, and again in 1979 by Finn Hødnebo and Hallvard Magerøy. Nonetheless, the book remains substantially unaltered; it is still generally found bound in the same format and contains the same interior and exterior ornamentation (based on motifs by Gerhard Munthe) as the original, and it is still filled with “masses” of pictures of vikings. Most Norwegians today, as Diana Whaley has pointed out, consider Snorri such a domestic feature that they would be amazed to find out that he was not a Norwegian, but an Icelander (Whaley 10). The narrator has become part of the narrative, and both have become absorbed into today’s Norwegian imaginary, inhabiting that Norwegian nation imagined by ordinary citizens and government officials alike.

²⁹ Contracted by chewing on contaminated straw while playing peasant in Setesdal.

³⁰ Wetlesen’s illustrations for *Heimskringla* show considerable gifts, but other examples of his art and details on his life are hard to find.

³¹ Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1991): 10.

The images of “masses of drawings of vikings” that the team of artists produced were indeed crucial to the success of the text, as Stenersen and his associates had planned. Perhaps they even intended to present a kind of Norwegian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, showing all the strong points of their culture (Snorri being an adopted Norwegian, in their construction) in one volume. On the other hand, Stenersen, Storm and Schjøtt clearly had another, less equivocal agenda in the production of their modern Snorri volume, as both its text and illustrations show. The fighting kings of viking-age Norway and their descendants are shown in as heroic a light as their deeds permit. A juxtaposition of two illustrations, both by Christian Krohg, not only glorifies Norway’s royal line, but makes so bold as to lampoon Sweden (with which Norway was still in union when the book was in production). In one illustration, the eleventh-century king Olaf (*den hellige*) of Norway is shown in armor, gazing heroically out at the viewer against a backdrop of sea, sky and ships; his contemporary, king Olaf of Sweden, is shown indoors, raging impotently with clenched fists, bared teeth and disarranged hair.³²

Norwegian national identity, as defined by Snorri, could then become at the turn of the century almost a viking identity. What need of Danish bourgeois classicism or Swedish urban cultivation in the face of such stark and solid Norwegian role models as Olaf Tryggvason the missionary and warrior king; or Harald Hardruler, conqueror of Sicily, Jerusalem (!) and (almost) England; or proud Gyda of Hordaland, who refused Harald Fairhair when he came courting; or Queen Gunnhild, ruthless kin-promoter, “mother of kings,” wife of Eirik Blood-Axe. Such rugged figures were simply the natural products of Norway’s challenging and character-building landscape, then as now.

The Afterlife of a National Imaginary

³² These illustrations occur in the first fifth of the Saga of Saint Olaf. In Lee M. Hollander’s English translation (*Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* [Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1995]) they appear on pp. 280 and 305.

Neither topical humor, art, psychological wish-fulfillment, nor official politics can fully explain the great popular success of this *Heimskringla* as Norway's national story and as proof of its legitimacy as an independent culture since the Middle Ages. With Norway's *fin-de-siècle* adaptation of Snorri's *Heimskringla*, we have the documented success story of a nation that created its own national culture by rewriting its national history at a crucial political moment. The national myth and psychological profile of the Norwegian that was created persists in Norway to this day, remaining in the foreground to help Norwegians conceptualize their roles in the community of nations in situations as diverse and harrowing as the Second World War, or as social and PR-oriented as the 1984 Lillehammer Winter Olympics.

Heimskringla's heroic kings were almost inescapably brought into relation to current events in these crucial turn-of-the-century decades, especially when Norwegian inheritors appeared of what would be constructed as the indomitable Viking spirit. Fridtjov Nansen and Roald Amundsen were conquering the poles ahead of explorers from other European nations; new archaeological finds from the Viking Age documented a civilization of great age and quality from pre-Christian Europe. Revelations of Viking prowess from the past converged with analogous Norwegian triumphs in the present, offering a vision of a strong nation with a continuing inheritance. The dates of these real and cultural rediscoveries show how cultural history converged with current event:

- 1880 Excavation of the Gokstad ship (Viking-age royal burial on land, found on the west side of the Oslo fjord; deep-sea vessel, dated 850-900 A.D.). The ship is in splendid condition considering its age, and was the first of its kind found so well preserved. It is one of the two chief showpieces of the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo to this day.
- 1892 Replica of the Gokstad ship, the Viking, crosses the Atlantic on the occasion of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago.
- 1893-96 Fridtjov Nansen's expeditions to the North Pole.
- 1899-1900 New translations, in *Bogmaal* and *Landsmaal* (modern "bokmål" and "nynorsk"; Gustav Storm and Steinar Schjøtt) of Snorri

Sturluson's *Heimskringla* issued by J. M. Stenersen Forlag; second edition subsidized by the government, following a proposal to the Storting. Published under the title *Kongesagaer* (Sagas of Kings).

- 1903 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, national-romantic novelist, dramatist and poet, awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.
- 1904 Excavation of the Oseberg ship, the second of the two most celebrated Viking-ship finds of all time (exquisitely decorated shallow-water ship, like the Gokstad ship found in a royal burial site on the west side of the Oslo fjord). Currently housed with the Gokstad ship at the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo.
- 1905 Dissolution of union with Sweden.
- 1906 Coronation of Haakon VII.
- 1911 Roald Amundsen's expedition to the South Pole.

In these eventful years, many other literary visions from Norway's grand viking past³³ overlapped with images of contemporary Norwegian heroes and kings functioning as sovereign actors in the Nordic arena. Some of Henrik Ibsen's early plays, such as *Hærmændene på Helgeland* (The Vikings at Helgeland; 1858) and *Kongsemnerne* (The Pretenders, 1863), had provided partial glimpses of that medieval past (Viking and post-Viking); but in these subsequent decades Ibsen's incomplete narratives were easily eclipsed by a fuller spectrum of past reality, re-vivified by present events.

This symbolic unity of Snorri, viking kings, and Norway still speaks in the ways established in the nineteenth century. Diana Whaley, in her book *Heimskringla: An Introduction*, gives an account of the "Snorraháttid" ("Snorri Jubilee") held at Reykholt, Iceland, in 1947. "On 20 July fifteen thousand people, among them Crown Prince Olav of Norway and the premiers of both countries," Whaley writes, met there at Snorri's one-time estate to honor his contributions. Speakers at the celebration

³³ Never mind that the vikings of history sailed out not only from what is today called Norway, but also Denmark, Sweden, Poland, northern Germany, the Orkneys, Scotland, Ireland, and so on.

recalled what Snorri had given to Scandinavia, not only by recording its history, enriching its literature and immortalizing its ancient language, but also by providing inspiration in the dark days of political oppression. When the words of Jónas frá Hriflu rang out, “Today two nations thank the author of *Heimskringla* for his help in their past battle for freedom,” they voiced the common opinion that the models of Nordic strength and spirit offered by Snorri’s narrative had lent inspiration to the struggles for national independence fought in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, and to Scandinavian morale in the Second World War. (Whaley10-11)

This inspiration would have not been available in this form for Norway if that popular edition of *Heimskringla* had not been commissioned, subsidized, and produced in that era of fruitful nationalist fervor at the turn of the century. Resurrection of Snorri’s narrative had been a deliberate act in the name of Norwegian nationalism, done in the knowledge and hope that the narrative would be seminal in bringing to pass Norway’s full independence. In 1947, a politician’s visit to Snorri’s home was almost a religious pilgrimage, evoking the reestablishment of that independence after the turmoil of Nazi occupation – as well as a re-claiming of the Viking past that Snorri had chronicled, which had been misused by the Nazis, but was the rightful property of Norway.

It is worth noting by contrast that Norwegian emigrants en route to, and already settled in, North America by the turn of the nineteenth century and shortly afterward seem to have missed the impact of this and other nationalist milestones taking place in Norway at the time. In any case, their descendants do not have Snorri on their bookshelves to the same degree as Norwegians in Norway do today. It is not their story; it is not the classic narrative of their ethnic identities, which are more often taken up with their own recent exodus (where from? what was the ship’s name? where landed?).

Despite the extreme fictionalization,³⁴ Garrison Keillor’s Lake

³⁴ Keillor’s quotations “in Norwegian” are sometimes flawless, sometimes strangely

Wobegon and its Norwegian Lutherans can be seen as filtered reflections of these immigrants. Their hereditary image is closely bound to farming, as is reflected in the infamous “Norwegian bachelor farmers” who grow the wheat on which the town’s fortune had been built a century before. There are no vikings in Lake Wobegon; if the town’s inhabitants are tougher than other immigrants, it is because they are stubborn, overly cautious, and hard-working — not bold or daring. Keillor is a writer not without insights: such Norwegian-American cultural identity may lie close to the actual self-image that Norway had *before* it refashioned itself into the independent nation we know today. Keillor’s mythical Norwegian-Americans, like many of their real counterparts, have had little opportunity to “remember” their heritage in terms of the Viking pictures of the *Heimskringla*.

Given the timing of the exodus of many Norwegian-Americans from the old country, then, it is not surprising that their descendants do not necessarily see the postwar nationalism-based humor in writers like Inger Hagerup, whose 1953 radio play *En te med sitron* (*Tea with Lemon*) could have a character lampooning the turn-of-the-century nationalist mania:

[Stolen] er i sagastil. Sagastil?? Ja, De vet sånn fra århundreskiftet, da en broderte flagg til å henge på veggene og alt det der. Den har brunt korsstingsbroderi på setet og dragehoder til armene.³⁵

[The chair] is in saga style. Saga style?? Yes, you know, like they did at the turn of the century, when people were embroidering flags to hang on the wall and all that stuff. It has brown cross-stitch embroidery on the seat and dragon-heads for armrests.

spelled, and sometimes utter inventions (e.g., “Till Norge in Sogn or Rein,” *Lake Wobegon Days* [New York: Viking, 1985], 64); the “Norwegian” Christmas carols sung with great nostalgia in Lake Wobegon appear to be partly genuine and partly bogus. But such pedantic authenticity is not at all what Keillor is about.

³⁵ Inger Hagerup, *En te med sitron*, lines 350-355. Included in Kathleen Stokker, *Norsk, nordmenn og Norge: Antologi* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

The Stenersen-Storm-Schjøtt *Heimskringla* is indeed a product of that milieu: the turn of the century, when people were embroidering flags. And the potential humor of that heritage was established, as we have seen, in the 1890s and beyond, after many Scandinavians had already left Europe to search for better economic opportunities in the New World.

Some Conclusions

How the Norwegians came to use a medieval chronicle text from Iceland to “embroider their flags” is a distinctive case study in the establishment of “imagined communities” in Europe, and one which answers to a unique constellation of social and political concerns found among the European bourgeoisie.

The fact that Snorri’s chronicle in Norway came into use as a recovered narrative rather than a manufactured one as usually seen in Anderson’s and Bhabha’s case studies does not mean that Norway did not, in general terms, follow their scenario for the mechanisms of national image-making. The lasting success of the *Heimskringla* viking heritage, however, may be unique: Norway has been able, almost unabashedly, to use its turn-of-the-century image to negotiate its historical course with few disruptions since that image was established. Even at this moment, Norwegian politicians and academics occupy themselves in a new *fin-de-siècle* flurry of Norwegian national self-examination, and the new media use that belief in Norway’s special role within Norden to face such current perceived threats as U. S. cultural imperialism, rising multi-ethnicity in Norwegian cities, and Norway’s impending membership in the European Union. Nineteenth-century philologists, artists, and politicians did their work well, to guarantee the persistence of Norway as a unique imagined culture.