

Icelandic Folklore and the Cultural Memory of Religious Change, Eric Shane Bryan. ARC Humanities Press, Leeds, 2021. 162 + vii pages. ISBN (HB): 9781641893756. ISBN (PB): 9781641894654. eISBN (PDF): 9781641893763.

This book is a real achievement. Its aim is “to understand the origins and development of religious belief in Iceland and greater Scandinavia through the lenses of five carefully selected Icelandic folktales collected in Iceland during the nineteenth century” (p. vi) – and this is, in my opinion, fully realized. This book ought to be read by anyone interested in the links between Old Norse lore recorded in medieval times and late-recorded folklore from the 18th and 19th centuries. It will, moreover, be of interest to people working with memory studies.

The book is divided into five main chapters and is moreover equipped with a preface, acknowledgements, footnotes, a select bibliography and an index. Not every work referenced in the footnotes is included in the bibliography; the notes contain all the necessary information for the reader to locate a given work, but the reader cannot rely on finding everything that is referenced in the bibliography. Apart from referencing sources and works relied upon, the copious notes also point out further material and scholarly discussions that the reader might find interesting to know of. This is, in other words, a very well-informed book.

In the introduction, the author sets out to “trace ... the origins and development of five post-Reformation Icelandic folktales in an attempt to understand cultural memories of Christianization and Reformation in Iceland and elsewhere in the North” (p. 1). The author proceeds to set up three criteria for selecting these specific five stories: 1) deep and discernible roots, 2) a focus on (aspects of) religious beliefs and 3) evidence of transformation over time of how those beliefs are perceived within cultural memory. Indeed, the concept of cultural memory is central to the book and its message and the example that runs through the entire exercise is religion and the way(s) in which it transforms over time, in the changing conditions presented by the course of history.

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Three of the five main chapters have previously been published as articles, though they have obviously been reworked to suit the format of the book here. The themes span death and changing views of the afterlife, gender, elves, sacred space and magicians – the last theme focusing much on the lore surrounding the famous Icelandic priest from around 1100, Sæmundur fróði Sigfússon. Each chapter takes as its starting point a particular folk narrative collected in Iceland in the 19th century and then traces its path through history by means of similar stories from other contexts, periods or cultures, by means of analysing the religious context at the time the story was recorded and holding this up against the contexts of other historical periods, by means of taking a very deep look at the details, structures and messages of the stories and – not least – by taking its subject matter seriously.

This can only really be done, because the author actually puts in the time and effort required to explore the religious history of Iceland – practically from pre-Christian times to Post-Reformation Lutheran times – and this produces the frame against which developments in the thinking behind and the changing understandings of a given narrative or motif can be traced. It sounds simple – and the author manages to make it look simple, not least because the book is compact and easy to read – but it is, in fact, a rather formidable task.

The first chapter of the book focuses on the well-known Icelandic folk narrative about the Deacon of Myrká, *Djárninn á Myrká*, about a good man who tragically drowns in a river and then comes back as a grim ghost to carry off his beloved and take her into the grave with him – a fate she narrowly escapes. Having introduced the story, the author proceeds to reach for its Proto-Indo-European roots by comparing it to variants of the international folktale ATU 365: ‘Dead Bridegroom Carries Off his Bride’, to folk ballads, to the gothic scene at the gravemound of the Norse hero Helgi in the eddic heroic poem of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, to other Norse heroic death scenes and to Ibn Fadlan’s eye-witness account of a Viking (?) funeral on the Volga in the year 921. It sounds like a big mouthful – and it is. But the author manages to convincingly expose a number of deep links and to clarify the development of the central narrative over time in a plausible manner. The key that makes this exercise so compelling is the author’s ability to analyse each version of the motif of the dead man who (seeks to) take his beloved into the grave with him *on its own terms*, through the lens of “the dominant religious infrastructure of its time” (p. 38) and of its cultural setting.

As part of his analyses, the author also concerns himself with what he

calls 'adjacency pairs' (pp. 35–38). The example in chapter 1 is the fact that the Deacon of Myrká becomes demonized after he has died, which leaves a functional void – the narrative itself offers no explanation as to how or why the 'good man' becomes an 'evil' creature in death. Because of this lack of explanation, a corresponding group of tales has arisen as an 'adjacency pair' to fill the void (p. 43). These other tales concern similar deaths, even occurring in the very same river as where the Deacon drowned, but without the demonization. The author explains: "When a part of the narrative legacy becomes offensive (...), the narrative suffers a pejoration. When the narrative seems lacking or irrational within that religious context, adjacent narratives or variants crop up to address the pressure of the irrationality or need" (p. 44).

This reader, at least, comes away from reading this book with a fresh view on the ways in which cultural memory works to preserve and yet transform narratives to suit the needs of people and their beliefs at any given time.

So, what are the downsides of the book? Well, it could have been longer and contained more examples without losing its momentum (at least, that is the feeling this reader is left with). And it could have done with an extra proofreading to avoid a number of minor flaws in the language. But, to be honest, I do not really have anything bad to say about the book. It is a joyful and enlightening read that has left me wanting to go off and think about the implications of its argument. The author has managed to make it possible not only to see manifestations of the past all around us, but also to understand why they look the way they do, what they tell us about ourselves and our culture and what we may learn about the past as well as the present from studying them as serious objects worthy of scholarly scrutiny. To anyone who has any doubts about what cultural memories are and what purpose they serve, this book provides an answer.

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