NINE hundred years ago there were two sovereigns in Scotland, neither of whom could claim to be much more formidable than the other: the one was the King of the Scots, the other the Jarl of the Orkneys. The dominions of Jarl Thorfinn embraced, his Saga tells us, twelve Scottish earldoms, and he twice defeated his southern rival in pitched battle. To this pinnacle of efficiency the island earldom could scarcely be expected to attain frequently, but for several centuries it was a factor to be reckoned with both in Norse and Scottish affairs. So late as the very end of the twelfth century King William of Scotland paid its Jarl the compliment of marching against him with 'a very mighty host'; and he only escaped a similar attention from King Sverrir of Norway through the mediation of the island bishop.

Most fortunately it was the golden age of literature as well as arms up in those northern waters, and in the Orkneyinga Saga we still can read the annals of that stirring time; how Sweyn returned to Gairsay with the silks he had won by his sword sewed to his sails, how St. Magnus the Martyr died, how Earl Rognvald fought and sang all the way to Jerusalem. From the middle of the ninth to the early part of the thirteenth century, sea-kings, jarls, and chieftains pass in a picturesque procession; their deeds accurately chronicled, their ways of life and their very speech portrayed, so that, considering how long their swords have been rust, we can still move in their society with surprising familiarity.

On at least one reader of those sagas, the question has long forced itself on looking round Orkney to-day: What became of that heroic age? How was it that high-born chieftains shrunk into 'peerie' lairds' and their drinking halls into buts and bens? Why should the swords of the Vikings be beaten so completely into ploughshares, and their sons go so regularly to kirk? There seems to be such a deep gulf fixed between the present and the past. Read a few chapters of the Orkneyinga Saga, and then examine an Orkney parish: it is like the contrast between a gale at sea and a calm upon a mill pond. Nothing appears to connect
the two. Those landmarks which in other places keep alive the memory of the
past and carry back our imagination to it: the ruined castle, the moated grange,
the ancient timbered village houses, the immemorial oaks planted by such and
such a monarch, the baron or squire still representing some historic name and
showing a charter with King Richard’s or King David’s seal; those links are
lacking here. It is as though the islands’ past had dived over a precipice and
become the present at the foot.

It is true that both in Orkney and Shetland their prehistoric peoples have
bequeathed a rich legacy of brochs and arrow heads and standing stones, but
apart from St Magnus Cathedral, the famous race of sea-rovers and saga-writers
have scarcely left us one stone still standing on another. Very probably the
Hall of Cursetter and the oldest parts of Skail House and Burness may date
from the sixteenth century, but scarcely beyond, and even then there is no tradi-
tion connected with them going even so far back as that. Take the most typical
and Scandinavian parish in Orkney, the parish of Harray, where till the latter
part of the eighteenth century the Norse language was still spoke by old people,
where old native surnames are thick, and their bearers still own the soil and can
still talk of pennylands and township customs.

Their oldest traditions show an entire unconsciousness of things ever having
been materially different from what they are to-day. Where did the great halls
stand where guests gathered to drink through Yule? Where were the things and
law-courts held? What Harray man followed Earl Rognvald on his crusade, or
even fought at Summerdale four centuries later? You will not get an answer to
one of these questions.

The records collected in this volume do not unfortunately answer every such
question one would like to put, yet they throw enough light on the past to make
the passing of the old order and the gradual process of transformation seem
clear compared with their obscurity heretofore. And possibly they may show
now and then that there still exist unsuspected links with very far-off times.

Some clear idea of the people and the land as they were when the Norse
power was in its zenith will help greatly towards an understanding of these mid-
way records. Lacking this (largely, it is to be presumed, for want of accessible
works by Scandinavia Scholars), earlier writers have sometimes gone astray
through not knowing quite what developments to expect. It is true that we have
no account of the actual settlement of Orkney and Shetland, but we have a very
minute and vivid account of the settlement of Iceland by their cousins and broth-
ers at the same period; and everything we learn of the life there is borne out by
what we glean of the earldom from its own saga; while the constitution of socie-
ty in the motherland of Norway has been analysed from king to cotter².

² My obligations are deep to Professor A. Taranger’s Udsigt over Den Norske Rets Histo-
rie. It is from this source that the following references and quotations are taken.