

NOVA SCOTIA AND THE FAR-FLUNG NORSE

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THE ancient Norsemen were a far-flung race. From the ninth to the eleventh century of the Christian Era they spread throughout the world, colonizing and conquering kingdoms. In their long ships—a fierce and blue-eyed multitude—the old Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes went south and east and west to new worlds. It is now perhaps beyond dispute that America was discovered by Vikings, for Leif, son of Eric the Red, undoubtedly set foot on North American soil in the year 1000 A. D., the millennial year that saw the crowning of Charlemagne as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, on Christmas Day, in the great church of Saint Peter at Rome. That year was to have marked the end of the world, as many of the faithful believed: instead, it saw the first faint beginning of an infinite change in ethnic adjustments. Europe discovered America in 1000 A. D., and three years later Nova Scotia was settled—for a time, at least.

Greenland had been discovered by the Norwegian Icelander Eric the Red in 982 A. D., and had been settled by Icelanders originally from Norway and from Norse Ireland. In 1003 A. D. Torfinn Karlsefne sailed from Norse Greenland with three or four ships and some 150 men, and formed a colony in Nova Scotia, or, as his generation called it, Vinland (Wineland). The *locale* of Wineland the Good, so celebrated in the old Norse Sagas of Iceland known as *Hauk's Book* and the *Book of Flatey* (Flat Ey, or Island), has been the subject of much dispute; but the majority of American scholars, according to Prof. Olson, have now identified Wineland as Nova Scotia, Labrador, and Newfoundland. The vines of Vinland, it has now been shown, were mountain cranberries, not grape-vines. Grapes do not ripen in the spring of the year, and it was at this season that Karlsefne towed home the boat, behind his little ship, full of the ripe fruit. This was some three years after he had effected his settlement, and had penetrated south to Boston. It had become impossible for him to remain in the delectable country, owing to the appearance of hosts of dark-skinned natives with broad faces and ugly hair—ugly, doubtless, because not golden or russet as was the hair of the Norsemen. These natives are now supposed to have been Esquimaux. Torfinn

Karlsefne returned whence he had come to Greenland and Iceland. Canada knew the white man no more till the days of the Cabots, father and son, those Venetian adventurers from Bristol whose discoveries were so little later in date than those of Columbus.

Greenland, however, continued to flourish as a white man's colony for centuries. Bishoprics and monasteries were founded there, and trade flourished. But change was at work among the Greenland Norse. In fact, they were losing their identity, through inter-marriage with the natives. This is the considered opinion of Dr. Fridtjof Nansen. They "went Pantee," so to speak, and darkness fell on their history. The older view is that the Esquimaux made war upon them and wiped them out, or that plague destroyed them. But the Esquimaux, though probably more numerous then than now, were never a warlike people.

In 1410 the last ship known to have visited the Norse colony in Greenland returned to Norway. Late in the fifteenth and early in the sixteenth centuries all Norse colonization in Greenland had practically vanished. In 1585 John Davis, the explorer, found only Esquimaux there. A dim romantic legend tells how an Elizabethan ship once sailed close inshore, somewhere in the region of Cape Farewell. The English sailors did not go ashore, but in the twilight they heard a voice coming to them from inland, which was recognized as uttering a Norse phrase such as was used by farmers to call cattle home. It was a voice only, and the rest was silence till in 1721 Hans Egede, a missionary, founded the first of the still-existing Danish settlements on the Greenland coast.¹

In Europe the Norse wandered far, and the Danes, as the Norsemen in England were called, were a terror to our early English ancestors. It is curious to reflect, now that the children of the Danish colony in London have presented oranges and lemons to the children of the parish of St. Clement Danes, in commemoration of the old connection of their ancestors with the parish and in allusion to the well-known nursery rhyme,² that these same ancestors about nine hundred years ago were besieging London according to annual custom.

To the Dane of the eleventh century London was an unrifled prize, a city to loot, and he lay with his fleets "below Bridge," waiting for an opportunity to seize a capital which, in the *Heimskringla Saga*, or ancient history of Scandinavia, figures as a rich and somewhat mysterious city of the South. The Danes besieged

1 A Government Report, published in English in Copenhagen in 1924, gives full details as to the Norse in Greenland. The last Norseman, according to an ancient account, was found dead and wearing an old Norse dress, at Herjolfsnes. The corpse lay unburied, with a worn-out knife-blade beside it.

2 "Oranges and lemons, the bells of St. Clemen's."

London in 1009 A. D. at frequent intervals, and again in 1013, 1014, and 1016. Their slim war-galleys lay at Deptford and Greenwich, and they had fortified Southwark (Sudivercher) with a rampart and ditch as long ago probably as the reign of King Svend Tvesjoeg. Southwark, when they were not busy besieging London, became their trading station. At the Southwark end of London Bridge the famous King Olaf fought a naval battle in 994. He was in alliance with Sweyn, the Dane. They found London Bridge strongly fenced with movable towers and ramparts, and they therefore protected their ninety-four ships "with roofs of timber and wattle, supported by short pillars, in such wise that there was space to wield axe and sword under cover." "A great battle took place, in which the holders of the bridge rained stones and spears on the advancing enemy. At last Olaf rowed right up to the bridge, and his men fastened ropes round its piers, and then, rowing down stream with might and main, they pulled down the bridge and drowned a great multitude of its defenders."¹

To the period of this great dim battle probably belongs the nursery rhyme beginning "London Bridge is broken down." It is with just this phrase that one of Olaf's skalds, Ottar Svarte by name, began his Saga on the battle:

London Bridge is broken down,
Gold is won, and bright renown.

Another skald sang:—

At London Bridge stout Olaf gave
Odin's law to his wars-men brave—
"To win or die!"
And their foemen fly.
Some by the dyke-side refuge gain—
Some in their tents on Southwark plain.

In 1013 Sweyn made his second attack on London. His son Canute fruitlessly besieged the city in 1016, but performed the wonderful feat of pushing his fleet past London Bridge through a channel dug across the swamps round Southwark. This channel ran from Redriff to Lambeth (Lambhythe), which became a Danish village. After the death of Hardicanute in 1042, the few Danes left in the kingdom, according to Strype, "married English women and compulsorily lived between Westminster and Ludgate, and there built a synagogue called Ecclesia Clementis Danorum."

It is interesting to reflect that a royal procession in honour of the King and Queen of Denmark should, in recent years, have

¹ Plarr and Walton, *A School History of Middlesex, including London.*

actually circled round what was once the principal Danish "wick" or settlement outside ancient London, the district, namely, round Saint Clement Danes Church, which is now known as Aldwych, the successor of the older Wych (Wick) Street. Upon the "Strand" of the widely-flowing Thames the Danish remnant, probably composed of merchants and traders, beached their galleys close to their wick or village, and carried on their trade with the Saxons, our ancestors, in the neighboring London. According to old Stow their church received its name of Saint Clement Danes because a Danish king Harold and other Danes had been buried there. The church almost certainly marks a Danish burial-place. Here, indeed, lay interred Harold Harefoot, son of Canute, whose corpse—according to the barbarous manner of the Dark Ages—was disinterred from its tomb in Westminster Abbey by Hardicanute, and, being thrown into the Thames, was picked up by a fisherman and buried in the Danes' churchyard. Hence it was removed to a round tower, which "ornamented" the church before its rebuilding at the close of the seventeenth century. The graceful tower and steeple, so exquisitely celebrated by W. E. Henley in his "London Voluntaries," were built by Gibbs in 1719, and perhaps the tower still covers the ancient Norse bones. Samuel Johnson, when resorting to the church in search of spiritual seclusion, may or may not have reflected on this old story of the buried king.

It would be possible to write at length of the Danish influence in London. We need not pause over such modern names as "Denmark Hill", "Denmark Street," and the great and little Denmark Halls. These date from the seventeenth century or thereabouts. But Lambeth has of course very old Danish memories, for it was here that in 1042 a Danish jarl celebrated his marriage, the subsequent feast being attended by Hardicanute and his followers. More curious still is the prosaic name of Gunnersbury, which travellers by train to Kew probably imagine to be a name derived from artillery-practice. This, however, is the "byrig," burgh, or great house, of Gonar, the kinswoman of Canute, a lady about whom it is possible to speculate at large, for she does not appear in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Chiswick, and possibly Ravenscourt, in the neighbourhood of Gunnersbury, would seem also to point to the Danish influence, for the "wick" occurs in the first place-name, and the "raven" in the second may refer to the royal standard or badge of the early Danes.

The Danish patron saints left their mark in the heart of London itself. Thus while St. Olaf is commemorated in St. Olave's Church in Hart Street, Southwark, St. Magnus's Church is on the City side

of London Bridge. Yet, as historians have remarked, the Danes influenced London but little, for they were themselves belated Anglo-Saxon invaders not differing essentially from the English in custom, language, or character. It is singular, indeed, at what an early date the savagery of the Norsemen disappeared and was forgotten in our midst.

But in their wildest day they were a grim menace. It was their custom, as has been recently pointed out, to seize the horses of the farmers along any stretch of invaded coast or in any countryside traversed by them. And as a grim cavalry the tall russet-haired warriors can be imagined sweeping down on luckless hamlets or scattered homesteads, there to play the game of the "berserker" with fire and sword. If the Saxon villagers could succeed in cutting off some stray marauder, bent on the theft of church plate, they flayed him and nailed the skin to a church-door. On ancient church-doors fragments of dried skin have been found at all times. Pepys describes one of the doors of Rochester Cathedral as being all a-flutter with Danes' skins. A dusty shrivelled scrap of skin from a church door was examined by Quekett, the microscopist, some seventy years ago, and was pronounced by him to have belonged to a red- or fair-haired man. Some of these fragments of skin are preserved in the historical section of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of England. They are very thick, and pierced by nail-holes. Mr. Rudyard Kipling told the present writer on a recent occasion that they could not be the skins of Danes, but must certainly have belonged to those blacker barbarians, the Huns. This is scarcely possible, but it may be that these fragments of "Danish" skin are really older than the times of the Norse invasions. They may, indeed, be relics of those human sacrifices which ancient builders implanted in the ground to bring good luck to the temples and houses they were building.

England is full of Danish memories which seem to cover or contain older traditions. These lines, it is true, are being written in the parish of St. Clement Danes, London, and they are being sent to Dane Hill in the country in Sussex, where dwells a member of the Editorial Board of *The Dalhousie Review*. "Dane-holes," along the shores of the Thames near its mouth, are now known to be of date much earlier than the Norse. They are pre-historic mines or storehouses, and were perhaps attributed to the Danes by the old English peasantry just as, by modern rustics, late Stone Age earthworks are attributed to Julius Caesar and the Romans.

To the popular consciousness in early days the Danes loomed large, an unknown race of invaders, the last and only one known.

Much that was mysterious was laid at their door in error. Thus "Danes-blood" and "Dane-wort," names of wild flowers, were supposed to have sprung up wherever on battlefields Danish blood had flowed. But the idea of flowers upspringing in blood seems to point back to pre-history. In Ireland, that mysterious people versed in Druid magic, the Tuatha dé Danann, the Tribes of the Goddess Danu, conquered the pre-Ayrian Firbolgs on the Field of Moytura. Lately, a ragged peasant there spoke of them to the present writer as "the Fairies." Are then the Danaans or the Dananians, (fairies) of Old Irish mythology, ancestors in folk-lore of the Danes in place-names or flower-names? It is a question for the Celtic scholar, and perhaps it has been discussed.