

The Dragon and the Raven: Saxons, Danes and the Problem of Defining National Character in Victorian England

In 1852, the artist Daniel Maclise exhibited ‘Alfred, the Saxon King, disguised as a Minstrel, in the Tent of Guthrum the Dane’ at the Royal Academy in London. In the painting, the ninth-century West Saxon monarch gazes at a welter of Danes who surround him, while the Danish king Guthrum in turn gazes at Alfred. The politics of this particular painting are far from simple and will be discussed in detail later in this essay. The image raises a general question, however, about the interaction of Danes and Saxons in the nineteenth-century imagination – in particular in relation to notions of British identity and ancestry – which it is the aim of this paper to investigate.

During the last two decades, as Britain has moved increasingly towards possible devolution, there has been a growth of interest among cultural historians in the development of British national identities in the nineteenth century. As part of this work, much attention has been allotted to Victorian Anglo-Saxonism. Critics such as Alan J. Frantzen, Tom Shippey and Clare Simmons have investigated how the rise of the middle classes, the presence of a Germanic royal family, the developments of philology, and antipathy to the French all contributed to nineteenth-century scholars increasingly claiming that ‘essentially the English people of 1,000 years ago were the same as the English of the present day’.¹ One of the earliest writers to identify the modern English with the Saxons in this manner was Sharon Turner, whose turn-of-the-century *History of the Anglo-Saxons* was the first extended attempt to dispel the negative, Norman-derived images of Saxons as ruthless invaders and barbarians which had prevailed from the Middle Ages. Turner addressed his readers as ‘the

¹ Clare Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick, 1990), p. 65.

posterity of the Anglo-Saxons'.² By the 1870s, the tendency had led to the terms 'English' and 'Old English' being used to describe the inhabitants and language of pre-Norman England.³ And by the last decades of the nineteenth century, its popular acceptance was signified by the growing general use of 'Anglo-Saxon' as a synonym for 'English' and by attempts to identify an intrinsic 'Anglo-Saxon nature' which could distinguish the modern English from other nationalities.⁴

Recent analysis of this nineteenth-century reception of Anglo-Saxon history has often focused specifically on the ways in which Saxons were juxtaposed with Normans in the Victorian imagination. Simmons' 1990 monograph, *Reversing the Conquest*, for instance, considers the problems that the Norman Conquest posed to Victorian narratives of historical progress, revealing how 1066 came to be presented as merely a 'temporary' defeat in an otherwise comedic Saxon history.⁵ The study thoroughly investigates depictions of a number of well-known Saxon and Norman figures in Victorian texts: the contrast, for instance, between King Harold's bravery and William the Conqueror's cunning in Charles Kingsley's 1866 *Hereward the Wake*, and the clash between the 'Anglican' Saxon and the 'Romish' Norman in Edward Bulwer Lytton's 1848 *Harold: The Last of the Saxons*.⁶

Besides Normans and Saxons, both *Hereward the Wake* and *Harold: The Last of the Saxons* also feature Viking characters, however. The Victorian fascination with Britain's Norse heritage has, like its Anglo-Saxonism, been a subject of interest in the last two decades. As Andrew Wawn has ably demonstrated in his landmark study of

² Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons from the Earliest Period to the Norman Conquest* (London, 1799), p. iv.

³ On this subject see Clare Simmons, 'Iron-worded Proof: Victorian Identity and the Old English Language', *Studies in Medievalism*, 4 (1992), p. 210.

⁴ Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, pp. 12, 182-184;.

⁵ Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, p. 192.

⁶ Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, pp. 160.

the subject, the Victorians effectively ‘invented the Vikings’.⁷ Although the world of Scandinavian sea-adventurers was first popularised in Britain in the late eighteenth century, through the translations of Thomas Percy and the short poems of John Campbell, the word ‘Viking’ is not recorded in English before 1807, and it was not until 1822, with the appearance of Sir Walter Scott’s novel *The Pirate*, that the Vikings provided the subject of any extended British literary form.⁸ In the following decades, English translations of Norse sagas fuelled an interest in the Old North that produced diverse constructions of the Vikings. As Wawn demonstrates, they were variously depicted by British authors as: ‘merchant adventurers, mercenary soldiers, pioneering colonists, pitiless raiders, self-sufficient farmers, cutting-edge naval technologists, primitive democrats, psychopathic berserks, ardent lovers and complicated poets’.⁹ And during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when ‘the floodgates’ of Old Northernism had really opened, dozens of British novels appeared featuring Viking heroes.¹⁰

Victorian interest in the Vikings was not simply fuelled by the thrill of the exotic. In many respects, the Vikings vied with the Saxons in the late nineteenth century to be identified as the source of modern Britain’s cultural, industrial and political successes. While Victorian Saxonists like Sir Henry Maine proclaimed that Victoria had ‘[...] in her veins the blood of Cerdic of Wessex’, Charles Kingsley claimed that she was descended from Odin, and William Morris that she was the heir of Ragnar Lodbrok (or Hairy Breeches).¹¹ Likewise, where Whiggish writers like J.

⁷ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 3.

⁸ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, pp. 21, 24, 3.

⁹ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 3.

¹¹ See W.S. Lily, ‘British Monarchy and Modern Democracy’, *Nineteenth Century*, 41 (1897), 859; Fanny Kingsley (ed), *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memoirs of his Life*, (London, 1891), vol. I, p. 203; May Morris (ed), *The Collected Works of William Morris* (London, 1910-15), vol VIII, p 238.

Lorimer and Arthur Arnold asserted that ‘the roots of our liberty, of our laws [...] are all to be traced to Saxon times’, George Mackenzie and Samuel Laing traced the country’s representative legislature emphatically back to Norway.¹²

It is by no means simple to ascertain how clearly Norsemen and Saxons were differentiated in Victorian culture. On the one hand, the nineteenth century inherited a tradition of discriminating carefully between the two nations. Sharon Turner, in his 1799 *History of the Anglo-Saxons*, had dismissed any notion of kinship between the Saxons and ‘the Vandals of Scandinavia’.¹³ On the other hand, however, Thomas Percy, in the preface and notes to his 1770 translation of Mallet’s *Northern Antiquities*, had classed Saxons and Scandinavians together as Gothic tribes, stressing that they ‘used two not very different dialects of the same language’, while Mallet himself had argued that the Angles had originally been Danes and consequently ‘at least two thirds of the conquerors of Great Britain came from Denmark [...] so that when the Danes again infested England about three or four hundred years later [...] they waged war with the descendants of their own ancestors’.¹⁴

Each of these attitudes can be located in Victorian texts. In the 1840s, the scientist and explorer John Thomas Stanley conflated Scandinavians and Saxons, lamenting that the ‘Vikings’ had never ‘conquered Ireland and peopled [it] with Norwegians Danes or Anglo-Saxons’.¹⁵ On the other hand, however, Samuel Laing – writing in the same decade – hotly contested that there was any affinity between Germans and Scandinavians, criticised scholars for searching for the roots of pre-

¹² Thomas Arnold, *Introductory Lectures on Modern History with the Inaugural Lecture*, in *Arnold’s Works* (London, 1849), p. 24; James Lorimer, ‘King Alfred’, *The North British Review*, 17 (1852), 145; Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 99.

¹³ Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons*, vol. I, p. 12.

¹⁴ Paul Henri Mallet, *Northern Antiquities: Or, a Description of the Manners, Customs, Religion and Laws of the Ancient Danes, and other Northern Nations*, ed. by Thomas Percy (London, 1770), vol. II, pp. iv, 196, 261.

¹⁵ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 48

Conquest England in Tacitus's *Germania*, and attacked modern Denmark and Sweden for emulating Germany.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century linguists and literary scholars argued vociferously over the relationship between Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon, particularly in the second half of the century. While some maintained that the languages were unrelated, others insisted that they were simply dialects of one language. A minority of Scandinavian enthusiasts towards the close of the century also developed a third position which echoed the views of Mallet, contending that not just the Anglo-Saxon language but the whole of Anglo-Saxon culture had simply been a degenerate form of Viking society.¹⁷ In Paul du Chaillu's 1889 study *The Viking Age*, for instance, the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain was dismissed as a myth, and the so-called Saxons identified as merely early Norse invaders, while in the 1850s, the historian and philologist George Stephens rejected the term 'Anglo-Saxon', coining his own description 'Anglo-Scandic' for Britain's population.¹⁸ Such views often carried a political subtext in the 1850s and 1860s when Britain was witnessing a contemporary clash between 'Saxon' and 'Viking' over the governance of the duchies of Schlesvig and Holstein, situated on the borders of Prussia and Denmark. For those British authors critical of Palmerston's intervention, demonstrating that their country's ancestry was more Norse than Germanic could be an indirect means of campaigning for Britain's support of Denmark in that conflict.¹⁹

These scholarly and political debates do seem to have filtered through to popular culture. This is suggested by Charles Kingsley's description of the modern English as the 'free Norse-Saxon race', in a letter dated 1851, but also by the seemingly deliberate confusion of Saxons with Danes in Rider Haggard's 1885

¹⁶ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 63, 48.

¹⁸ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 330.

¹⁹ See Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, 232-3.

adventure novel *King Solomon's Mines*.²⁰ Haggard's great white warrior Sir Henry Curtis – the most muscularly heroic of all the book's characters – has 'yellow hair, a big yellow beard [...] and large grey eyes'.²¹ He is greatly admired by the narrator Allen Quartermain who avers:

I never saw a finer-looking man, and somehow he reminded me of an ancient Dane. Not that I know much of ancient Danes, though I remember once seeing a picture of some of those gentry, who, as I take it, were a kind of white Zulus. They were drinking out of big horns, and their hair hung down their backs, and as I looked at my friend standing there by the companion-ladder, I thought that if one only let his hair grow a bit, put one of those chain shirts onto those great shoulders of his, and gave him a big battle-axe and a horn mug, he might have sat as a model for that picture. And by the way it is a curious thing, and just shows how the blood will out, I found out afterwards that Sir Henry Curtis [...] was of Danish blood.

Quartermain's views on racial types are, however, those of a narrator who proves himself unreliable throughout this novel, and who consistently misattributes quotations to the only two works of literature he knows – the *Ingoldsby Legends* and the *Old Testament*.²² Indeed, a fictional editor warns the reader in a footnote: 'Mr Quartermain's ideas about the ancient Danes seem to be rather confused; we have always understood that they were dark-haired people. Probably he was thinking of Saxons'.²³ Whatever the hair colour of the ancient Danes, all notions of racial determinism – that 'the blood will out' – here seem to be deliberately undermined. Haggard's satire suggests that not only were the relationships between Vikings and Saxons convoluted in Victorian high culture, but that by the late nineteenth century there was a broad popular awareness of the competing claims of Saxonists and Old

²⁰ In Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. xv.

²¹ H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (Oxford, 2006), p. 11.

²² See Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 210.

²³ Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*, p. 11.

Northernists, owing to the dissemination of their views in fictional or other popular texts .

One fictional text which certainly did investigate the links between Saxons and Danes was Lytton's *Harold: The Last of the Saxons*. In his study *The Victorians and the Vikings*, Andrew Wawn remarks that there is 'stern Saxon criticism of [Old Northern] piracy, idolatry, and horse-flesh eating' in the novel, but that nevertheless 'the narrator reminds the reader constantly that old northern sea-kings' blood still flows in Teutonic veins'.²⁴ Indeed, in this text the most important differences between Saxon and Dane seem to be understandable in terms of Norman acculturation: minstrelsy has been forgotten in Anglo-Saxon England, for instance, because of the sway of the Norman-influenced King Edward. The other novels which Wawn discusses in which Saxons and Danes interact – Kingsley's *Hereward the Wake* and Walter Scott's *Count Robert of Paris* – are, like Lytton's text, situated around the date of the Norman Conquest of England.²⁵ Such a setting, at a period when Saxons and Danes had co-habited in England for many years, seems to have allowed novelists to at least partially dispense with the cultural and political complexities which many must have realized were involved in distinguishing between Saxon and Viking. This approach was not available, however, to those who chose to set historical narratives during the period of eighth, ninth and tenth-century Viking invasions, when Old Northern and Saxon cultures interacted in more inescapably hostile modes, and without any obviously anti-heroic Norman presence as a foil. For such authors, decisions about national heritage, regional loyalties and personal identity were forced more starkly to the fore – yet little research has focused on how they handled this dilemma.

²⁴ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 316.

²⁵ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, pp. 317-9.

Among the nineteenth-century fictional texts to deal with Britain's main periods of Viking invasion are several treatments of the battle of Brunanburh and a few novels set around the attacks on Lindisfarne in 793AD. By far the largest grouping of literature, however, is the substantial body of works dealing with the Viking incursions during the reign of King Alfred the Great. During the nineteenth century, as I have argued elsewhere, a veritable cult of King Alfred developed in Britain, with numerous works of art produced and over 100 texts written about the king, including poetry, plays, novels, children's stories and popular histories. The majority of these focused on Alfred's interactions with Viking raiders. Just as the battle of Hastings has provided a focus for considering the Saxon-Norman dichotomy in the nineteenth century, therefore, Alfred's struggles against the Danes – and in particular, the successful Danish invasion of Wessex in 878 AD – can provide a useful nexus for investigating the relationship of Saxon to Viking in the Victorian imagination.

It is not simply a matter of the quantity of nineteenth-century Alfredian material available which makes Alfred and the Vikings the chosen focus of this paper, however. Images of Alfred in Victorian literature do bear important intertextual relationships with earlier images of Normans, and claims about Alfred's stereotypically Saxon – and English – love of liberty, justice, and so on, need to be read in relation to an established rhetoric which placed the Normans in juxtaposition to those cultural values. However, more interestingly, many of the specific British institutions attributed to King Alfred in the nineteenth century were almost contemporaneously also claimed by Old Northernists to possess Viking origins. So where Sir George MacKenzie and Sir Walter Scott in the second decade of the nineteenth century reiterated Danish claims that Britain's jury system derived from

the Vikings, in plays performed in 1831 and 1838 it was Alfred who was credited with instituting that practice.²⁶ Likewise, where Samuel Laing contended in 1844 that the Vikings were the origin of Britain's naval supremacy, imperial prowess and representative legislature, in the same decade the poet Martin Farquhar Tupper made identical claims for Alfred, proclaiming in one of his (many) Alfredian poems:

Sailors, ten centuries our British boast,

He sent you first afloat on every coast

and in another describing the Saxon king as the source of 'half the best we boast in British liberties and laws'.²⁷

In succeeding decades, these claims continued to be made both for Alfred and for the Vikings. The author of boys' adventure stories J.M. Ballantyne asserted in his 1869 novel *Erling the Bold* that the Norsemen were responsible for 'much of what is good in our laws', but the same children who read his work may well have also come across Charles Dickens' assertion in his 1852 *Child's History of England* that Alfred's spirit 'still inspires some of our best English laws'.²⁸ Ballantyne not only praised the Vikings for their legislature, he also hailed them for introducing to the British character 'much of what is manly and vigorous [...] much of our intense love of freedom and fair-play', praising the Northmen's 'pith, pluck, enterprise and sense of justice'.²⁹ In a similar vein, it was claimed that in Alfred's supposed character the finest traits of English national identity could be identified. Just two years before Ballantyne's Viking-age novel was published, Edward Augustus Freeman's multi-

²⁶ See Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 86; James Magnus, *Alfred the Great*, in *Woloski: A Tragedy; Alfred the Great: A Play; And Poems* (London, 1838), p. 155; James Sheridan Knowles, *Alfred the Great: Or, the Patriot King* (London, 1831), p. 84.

²⁷ Martin Farquhar Tupper, 'The Order of Alfred', in *Ballads for the Times* (London, 1851), p. 253.

²⁸ Robert Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold* (London, 1869), p. 305; Charles Dickens, *A Child's History of England* (London, 1852), p. 24.

²⁹ Robert Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold*, p. 305.

volume *History of the Norman Conquest* appeared, claiming that Alfred was ‘the most perfect character in history’.³⁰

Among the qualities which Freeman praised in the Saxon king were his ‘simple, straight-forward discharge of the duty of the moment’, and his ‘pure, simple, almost childlike disinterestedness’.³¹ The popularity of racialist theories of identity in Victorian Britain meant that a flurry of later writers followed Freeman’s example. For Conan Doyle, Alfred was ‘the man who combined in his person all the virtues which go to make up the best type of Englishman. He was sturdy, resolute, persevering, and formidable in action’.³² The Bishop of Winchester praised Alfred for his ‘deep-rooted love of straightforwardness, and of absolute fairness between man and man’.³³ While for the British prime minister Lord Rosebery, Alfred was ‘the ideal Englishman [...] the embodiment of our civilization [...] the highest and best type of the qualities which we cherish in our national character’.³⁴

The Vikings and the Saxons seem to have competed, then, in the nineteenth century to be identified as the source of those masculine qualities – fairness, vigour, and straight-forwardness – which were considered to lie at the heart of British national identity, and which were repeatedly invoked in pro-imperial rhetoric. On some occasions, rhetoricians seem to have been self-conscious in this use of the past. At the celebrations held to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of Alfred’s death, Lord Rosebery mused: ‘Does it not show a great sign of the times? A quarter of a century ago there was not the same passion for raising memorials of our historic heroes. How does that come about? [...] Is it not the growing sense of British Empire?’

³⁰ Edward A. Freeman, *History of the Norman Conquest*, (Oxford, 1867), p. 51.

³¹ Freeman, *History of the Norman Conquest*, p. 51.

³² Quoted in Alfred Bowker, *The King Alfred Millenary: A Record of the National Commemoration* (London, 1902), p. 20.

³³ Quoted in Bowker, *The King Alfred Millenary*, p. 118.

³⁴ Quoted in the *Times* (Sep 21, 1901), p. 10.

[...] we dignify and sanctify our own aspirations by referring them to the historic past.³⁵

With such self-consciousness about the uses to which history was being put by the late Victorian period, it seems improbable that Alfredian authors could have been unaware that their claims for Alfred as national prototype faced competing assertions from Old Northernists, as well as from admirers of the Normans. There is certainly evidence that this was far from being the case by the end of the century. In his 1900 history *Alfred to Victoria*, George Eayrs, while celebrating Alfred, acknowledged that he represented only one of ‘several strains which have combined to produce that distinctive type, the Englishman’.³⁶ With this context in mind, it is therefore of interest to investigate the different ways in which Alfredian authors dealt with the Viking characters who featured in their texts, at different cultural moments in the nineteenth century.

Besides hordes of anonymous Vikings, those nineteenth-century writers could choose to include several named Danish leaders in their works. These are identified in the two earliest sources for Alfred’s reign – the ninth-century *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Asser’s 893 biography, the *Life of King Alfred*. The first to be named in Asser’s *Life* is a Viking king, Halfdan, who invaded Northumbria and ravaged Strathclyde in 875 and began to ‘cultivate the land’ the following year. Three other Viking kings – Guthrum, Oscetel and Anwend – are also mentioned in the same entry for making and then breaking a treaty with Alfred, disregarding the oaths they had sworn and the hostages exchanged.³⁷ In 878, Guthrum is mentioned again – this time in defeat. According to Asser, Guthrum ‘promised to accept Christianity and to

³⁵ Quoted in the *Times* (Sep. 21, 1901), p. 10.

³⁶ George Eayrs, *Alfred to Victoria: Hands Across a Thousand Years* (London, 1902), p. 19.

³⁷ Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, eds, *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 84.

receive baptism at King Alfred's hand'.³⁸ He fulfilled this promise and 'remained with the king for twelve nights after he had been baptized, during which time Alfred received him as his 'adoptive son' and 'freely bestowed many excellent treasures on him and all his men'.³⁹

This account is confirmed by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which adds that Guthrum's 'baptismal name was Æthelstan' and that he afterwards 'lived in East Anglia, and was the first to settle that land'.⁴⁰ The *Chronicle* also names a further Viking king who invaded Alfred's kingdom. Hastein is first mentioned in the entry for 892, when his ships sailed up the Thames and he made fortifications at Milton and Benfleet. The following year, Alfred's armies stormed the Benfleet fort, and we are told:

Hastein's wife and his two sons were brought to the king [Alfred]; and he gave them back again, because one of them was his godson and the other the godson of Ealdorman Ethelred. They had stood sponsor to them before Hastein came to Benfleet, and Hastein had given Alfred hostages and oaths [...] But as soon as the Vikings arrived at Benfleet and the fortification was made, Hastein went plundering in Alfred's kingdom – that very part for which Ethelred, his son's godfather, was responsible; and afterwards, he was out plundering in that same kingdom a second time when his fortification was stormed.⁴¹

Given such accounts of Viking plunder, faithlessness and treachery in Saxon sources which were in print by the start of the eighteenth century and readily available a century later, it is perhaps unsurprising that in many nineteenth-century Alfredian texts, the Vikings function primarily as an exotic and dangerous other.⁴² This tendency began in the Georgian period. In David Mallet and James Thomson's

³⁸ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 84.

³⁹ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 85.

⁴⁰ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 113.

⁴¹ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 116.

⁴² See Joanne Parker, *England's Darling: The Victorian Cult of Alfred the Great* (Manchester, 2007), pp. 47, 50.

Alfred: A Masque, for instance (first performed in 1740 – thirty years before a very different Mallet’s *Northern Antiquities* was translated into English) the Danes are ‘foreign ruffians’, ‘inhuman pirates’, and ‘haughty, cruel [...] robbers/ That violate the sanctity of leagues,/ The reverend seal of oaths’.⁴³ In this play, there is no truce with any Danes, none are converted by Alfred to Christianity, and there is much jubilation when ‘twice six hundred’ are slaughtered in their beds along with their leader.⁴⁴

Likewise, in the anonymous 1753 play *Alfred the Great: Deliverer of his Country*, the Vikings are treacherous oath-breakers who are riven by internal disputes and kill Alfred’s outnumbered son by stabbing him from behind in a ‘base’ and ‘cowardly’ fashion (though in this play, Guthrum is baptised).⁴⁵ John Home’s 1778 *Alfred: A Tragedy*, provides a similarly negative image of the Danes, but with far more colour – presumably influenced by the publication of the 1768 *Norse Odes* of Thomas Gray and Thomas Percy’s 1763 *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, as well perhaps as Percy’s translation of *Northern Antiquities*. Home’s Vikings are bigamous ‘infidels’ who swear ‘by Loda’s altar, stain’d with human blood’, take women by force when they are frustrated in love, and die cheerfully – assured that they are going ‘to the Valkyrian maids [...] to Odin and the hall of joy’.⁴⁶ And in Anne Fuller’s 1789 novel, *The Son of Ethelwulf*, the Vikings live in tents where precious ornaments are ‘scattered in wild profusion’, and are reduced to a ‘senseless condition’ at bacchanalian feasts.⁴⁷

⁴³ Mallet, *Northern Antiquities*, pp. 39, 11.

⁴⁴ Mallet, *Northern Antiquities*, p. 37.

⁴⁵ Anon, *Alfred the Great: Deliverer of his Country: A Tragedy* (London, 1753), pp. 9, 20, 68.

⁴⁶ John Home, *Alfred: A Tragedy* (London, 1778), p. 29, 76. See also Alexander Bicknell, *The Patriot King: Or Alfred and Elvida. An Historical Tragedy* (London, 1788) in which the Vikings battle over women, weave (ineffectual) magic spells, and die cursing. It was first performed in 1788.

⁴⁷ Anne Fuller, *The Son of Ethelwulf* (London, 1789), pp. 33, 43.

In some of these texts, it seems that there may be a case for reading such negative images of the Vikings as a means of displacing onto the Danish nation from the Saxons any of the negative qualities associated generally with northern nations in that period prior to the publication of Sharon Turner's *History of the Anglo-Saxons* – lust for battle, alcoholism, avarice, rough manners, and so on. A less problematic idealisation of Alfred as a Saxon king could thereby be achieved. That this might have been the case is suggested by references to the ninth century in general by these authors as 'a remote and barbarous age' and a time 'involved in clouds and darkness'.⁴⁸

Such depictions of the Danes continued to prevail in the early nineteenth century and seem still to have been a means of displacing from the Saxons to the Danes the most negative aspects of a period still partially remembered as one 'before true civilization', when men 'were large feeders and drank heavily'.⁴⁹ In *Ancient Times: A Drama* by Joseph Strutt (better known for his books on costume), the Viking king 'Godrun' proclaims that he 'delights in war', and drinks alcohol from the 'skulls of those I hate'.⁵⁰ The Vikings drink from the skulls of their enemies with equal enthusiasm in James Magnus's 1838 play *Alfred the Great*, in which they also plot and commit acts of both uxoricide and patricide, and in M. Lonsdale's 1865 Alfredian ballet, they fight over women, succumb to drunkenness, and sacrifice virgins.⁵¹ That such depictions were becoming clichéd stock devices by the middle of the nineteenth century is suggested not simply by their appearance in ballet, but also by Robert Brough's parodic 1860 *Alfred the Great: Or, The Minstrel King, An Historical*

⁴⁸ Home, *Alfred: A Tragedy*, p. x.

⁴⁹ Eliza Kerr, *Two Saxon Maidens. Gytha: A Story of the Time of Baeda. Elgiva: A Story of the Time of Alfred the Great* (London, 1885), p. 242; G.A. Henty, *The Dragon and the Raven: Or, The Days of King Alfred* (London, 1886), p. 64. See also Henty, *The Dragon and the Raven*, p. 20.

⁵⁰ Joseph Strutt, *Ancient Times: A Drama* (Edinburgh, 1808), p. 105.

⁵¹ M. Lonsdale, *Sketch of Alfred the Great: Or, The Danish Invasion: A Grand Historical Ballet* (London, 1865), pp. 5,6.

Extravaganza in which Guthrum is so drunk as to see double and plans to sacrifice a virgin with farcical ineptitude.⁵²

Anne Manning's 1861 novel, *The Chronicle of Ethelfled* seems to be among the latest of this group of works.⁵³ In Manning's text, the Danes are referred to only as 'pagans' (with no reference to their nationality) and are represented as the enemy in a holy war. When Alfred attacks them, there is wholehearted approval of the conflict.

We are informed that he:

'[...] worked off his grief and rage in the best way possible for us all, by attacking the pagans [...] in the most infuriate manner'.⁵⁴

The Danes themselves prepare for battle by 'lashing up their passions with dreadful howlings, clashing their swords, clanging their shields, and pransing [sic] hither and thither like so many mad creatures'.⁵⁵

The primitivism of the description and the lack of any reference to their nationality seems to link the Danes imaginatively to developing, non-Christian nations in the nineteenth century. Certainly, this is a text with little doubt about the ideology of progress – the narrator seems wholly convinced by the Danes' sudden conversion to Christianity just a little later in the narrative. The fact that this text is narrated in the first-person by a Saxon abbess and claims to be translated from her 'badly Latinized' writing rather complicates its depiction of the Vikings, however, meaning that it can by no means be taken as representative of dominant views around

⁵² Robert B. Brough, *Alfred the Great: Or, The Minstrel King. An Historical Extravaganza* (London, 1860), pp. 12, 46.

⁵³ Although odd examples can be found until the start of the twentieth century – see for instance Florence Attenborough's *Alfred the Great: A Drama* (London, 1902), in which the Danes drink human blood while pledging faith to Odin and Valhalla (pp. 4, 20) and G. A. Henty's *The Dragon and the Raven* in which they perform human sacrifice and consult omens.

⁵⁴ Anne Manning, *The Chronicle of Ethelfled* (London, 1861), p. 55.

⁵⁵ Manning, *The Chronicle of Ethelfled*, p. 181.

the time of its publication.⁵⁶ Indeed, the reader is warned in the book's preface not to 'consume too much midnight oil in ascertaining the authenticity' of the tale.⁵⁷

By the second half of the nineteenth century when Manning was writing, the dominant attitude to Vikings among Alfredian authors seems to have been shifting to one of greater understanding and tolerance – perhaps in part because of the growing British contact with non-Christian native tribes in different parts of the empire and an increasing stress on the value of education and acculturation of the colonised, rather than conquest. That this might have been an important factor is suggested by Stratford Canning's 1876 play *Alfred the Great in Athelney* in which the Danes are explicitly likened to 'Ethiops' and by G.A. Henty's observation in his novel for boys that the Danes were 'very dark, as much so as modern gypsies'.⁵⁸ Certainly, by the time that Edmund Hill's *Alfred the Great: A Drama* was published, Alfred's Saxon wife would pray for the Danes as 'poor unbelievers' who 'must to damnation go in ignorance', while Alfred himself could muse:

How well they bear themselves!
[...] This is fine metal and it ringeth true;
Rough and unminted, yet of purest gold [...]
To make them friends and servants of our God
Were victory indeed.⁵⁹

Julian D. Richards has recently argued in his 2005 study *The Vikings* that in the nineteenth century 'when Vikings were described by English historians, they appeared as treacherous barbarians, and as foils for the great hero Alfred'.⁶⁰ This claim is certainly true of the early part of the century, but is too simplistic if works of historical fiction from later in the period are taken into account.

⁵⁶ Manning, *The Chronicle of Ethelfled*, p. iii.

⁵⁷ Manning, *The Chronicle of Ethelfled*, p. iii.

⁵⁸ Stratford Canning, *Alfred the Great in Athelney. An Historical Play* (London, 1876), p. 174.

⁵⁹ Edmund L. Hill, *Alfred the Great: A Drama* (London, 1901), pp. 61, 73.

⁶⁰ Julian D. Richards, *The Vikings* (Oxford 2005), p. 123.

Indeed, some sympathy for the Vikings can be detected in a few texts written before 1850. In Magnus's *Alfred the Great*, the Saxon captive and bride of the Viking king Hubba bewails her dead husband: 'He was a Dane, and o'er his mind/ Religion had not shed her chast'ning influence:/ Nor from his breast had Education drawn/ The rank and overgrowing weeds of Passion'.⁶¹ Magnus's Alfred (while in disguise) also saves Guthrum from an assassin and later, when he offers a pardon to the Viking, promises that he is 'as much your friend' as when dressed as a minstrel.⁶² For those Alfredian authors like Magnus who wished to present the Vikings with some degree of sympathy, the late-medieval tale that Alfred had entered the Viking camp in disguise provided an opportunity to investigate more deeply the character of the king's Danish enemies. For a few authors, even, the brief episode in the Viking camp was developed into the main interest of their text – R. Kelsey's 1852 epic poem *Alfred of Wessex* allots almost forty pages to describing the Danes' behaviour in their own camp.

The story of Alfred's disguised foray into the Viking camp derives from the early-twelfth-century *History of the Kings of England* by William of Malmesbury.

This relates how, during his time in hiding from the Danes in 878 AD, Alfred:

hazarded an experiment of consummate art. Accompanied only by one of his faithful adherents, he entered the tent of the Danish king under the disguise of a mimic; and being admitted, in his assumed capacity of jester, to every corner of the banqueting-room, there was no object of secrecy that he did not minutely attend to both with eyes and ears. Remaining there several days, till he had satisfied his mind on every matter which he wished to know, he returned to Adelingai; and assembling his companions, pointed out the indolence of the enemy, and the easiness of their defeat.⁶³

⁶¹ Magnus, *Alfred the Great*, p. 151.

⁶² Magnus, *Alfred the Great*, p. 154.

⁶³ William of Malmesbury, *The History of the Kings of England*, in Joseph Stevenson, *The Church Historians of England*, vol. III:I (London, 1853-5), p. 101.

The Malmesbury chronicle was published as early as 1596 and was translated into English in 1815 so it was well-known and easily available to the authors of Victorian Alfrediana. The story was also included in Thomas Percy's 1765 *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, in which account Alfred dresses as a minstrel rather than as a jester – a version which became dominant in the nineteenth century, in part because of the cult of minstrelsy at that time.⁶⁴

In William of Malmesbury's narrative, the Danish king before whom Alfred appears is unnamed and it is the 'indolence' of the enemy which attracts Alfred's notice. Increasingly in the nineteenth century, however, the king was identified as Guthrum and given a speaking part in the narrative. In earlier texts, this seems to have been done largely as a means of assuaging anxiety about the speed of the Danish king's later conversion to Christianity. In John Fitchett's lengthy 1842 *King Alfred: A Poem*, Book XXXVII is devoted to relating how

Alfred, in his character of a minstrel, sings in compliance with Guthrum's request, the revelation of the last day, according to the Christian belief, and afterwards further explains to Guthrum the system of Christianity, thereby laying the foundations of the future conversion of the Danish monarch.⁶⁵

Other writers imagined that the foundations for the conversion might have been laid by means of some personal fraternity being established between Guthrum and Alfred, while the latter was disguised. In the 1831 play *Alfred the Great: Or, The Patriot King* by James Sheridan Knowles, Guthrum is 'struck by the deportment' of the disguised Alfred, while the Saxon king, in his turn, advises Guthrum on how to deal

⁶⁴ See C.M. Jackson-Houlston, *Ballads, Songs and Snatches: The Appropriation of Folk Song and Popular Culture in British Nineteenth-Century Realist Prose* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 1-5.

⁶⁵ John Fitchett, *King Alfred: A Poem* [ed. by Robert Roscoe, 6 vols] (London, 1842), vol. V, p. 242.

with his petulant daughter and muses ‘A regal nature his!/ There’s something in thee, Guthrum, I could claim close kindred with’.⁶⁶

As the nineteenth century progressed, the notion of some ‘close kindred’ between Alfred and Guthrum seems to have been imagined less in personal and domestic terms, and more in racial terms, as a generalised identity between Saxon and Dane as North European nations. In many works, Alfred’s minstrelsy and Guthrum’s appreciation of this suggests shared cultural values, along the lines argued by Percy and Mallet in *Northern Antiquities*. Indeed, in Stratford Canning’s 1876 *Alfred the Great in Athelnay*, the Danes view the Saxons as merely ‘those/who, like ourselves, came with the tides’.⁶⁷ Such texts suggest a growing awareness of the hybridity of the English population. They also seem to indicate some level of cultural anxiety about the stability of the union of Great Britain, however. In many texts, the friendship between Alfred and Guthrum is geared towards not Christian conversion, but rather political union. In Canning’s text, the Saxon king looks forward with Guthrum to Britain as a nation ‘haply formed of parts distinct, but welded into one’ and Guthrum concurs, ‘Dane and Saxon should be one’.⁶⁸

The contemporary relevance of depicting a positive union between Saxon and Dane is made more explicit in Martin Tupper’s *Alfred: a Patriotic Play*, which ends with ‘Guthrom’ marrying Alfred’s sister ‘Bertha’ at the nationally symbolic location of Glastonbury, to the sound of the National Anthem, and against a backdrop of ‘crowds of Danes and English, as in amicable union of the two nations, their flags and emblems mixed’.⁶⁹ This was, after all, only half a century after the cross of St Patrick had been conjoined with the English flag at the 1801 Act of Union.

⁶⁶ Knowles, *Alfred the Great: Or the Patriot King*, pp. 42, 52, 62.

⁶⁷ Canning, *Alfred the Great in Athelnay*, p. 43.

⁶⁸ Canning, *Alfred the Great in Athelnay*, pp. 170, 168.

⁶⁹ Tupper, *Alfred: A Patriotic Play* (Westminster, 1850), p. 49.

Maintaining the union of Great Britain is also a concern of Alfred Austin's 1896 play *England's Darling*, in which Alfred writes 'tales and charters' as an attempt to 'weld in one/ Jute, Angle, Frisian, aye and these fierce Danes'.⁷⁰ Austin seems to have seen his own literary mission as something similar. In the play, the Vikings stand proxy for the peripheral nations of the United Kingdom. Although Alfred's enemies are invading Danes, when the king prays for help, his wish is that:

I Alfred, your weak servant, yet may be
Law to North Wales and terror to Strathclyde.⁷¹

Although Austin was writing long after the 1801 Act of Union, there seems some recognition here that British nationality was still an unstable construct. In particular, he may have been aware of the Welsh nationalist furore that arose in the wake of the 1870 Government Education Act (which made English the medium of communication in all Welsh schools), since the play includes several Welsh characters – 'dark outlandish men/ That hang upon your heel as though afeard' – who come to Alfred's court to 'crave' his overlordship.⁷²

It seems, then, that the Vikings could stand in for the Irish, the Scots or the Welsh in nineteenth-century fictions of union. At the same time, though, they were also used to celebrate the increasingly multicultural nature of Britain's royal family. Much critical work has focused on the uses of Saxonism to promote the Hanoverians in Britain. Austin's play, however, is dedicated to 'her Royal Highness Alexandra, Princess of Wales, daughter of vanished Vikings and mother of English kings to be'.⁷³ Alexandra was the Danish bride of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales and had been welcomed by Alfred Tennyson at her 1863 coronation as a 'Sea King's daughter from

⁷⁰ Austin, *England's Darling*, 5th edn (London, 1896), p. 16.

⁷¹ Austin, *England's Darling*, p. 16

⁷² Austin, pp. 48, 49. On Welsh nationalism see J.A. Davies, *Education in a Welsh Rural Community, 1870-1873* (Cardiff, 1973), pp. 19-27.

⁷³ Austin, *England's Darling*, p. v.

over the sea', with the promise: 'Saxon and Norman and Dane are we,/ But all of us Danes in our welcome of thee'.⁷⁴ She is invoked at the end of Austen's play in the figure of 'Edgiva' the daughter of Guthrum, who marries Alfred's son.

In his 2005 study *The Vikings* Richards claims that in the nineteenth century, 'the Anglo-Saxons were the ancestral us, while the Vikings were them'.⁷⁵ Alexandra's popularity as Princess of Wales was just one factor which makes this too simplistic a reading. Not only does the figure of Guthrum complicate notions of a distinct Saxon type in many Alfredian texts, but in a few works the equation of Saxon with English, and Viking with other seems almost to be inverted. Daniel Maclise's 1852 painting of 'Alfred, the Saxon King, disguised as a Minstrel, in the Tent of Guthrum the Dane' has been classed by the historian Roy Strong as part of the 'steady flow of works depicting "our forefathers"' that emerged following the publication of J.M. Kemble's 1849 history *The Saxons in England* – a work which presented the Victorians as emphatically Anglo-Saxon.⁷⁶ However, the painting is another work in which a bond seems to be suggested between Alfred and Guthrum – in this case by the striking physical resemblance of the two men, who both have longer, fairer hair than the welter of intoxicated Danes around them, and are facially similar. The racial politics of the painting are even more complicated than this merging of national types suggests, though. The image is striking as the only representation of Alfred as red-haired. To understand the likely significance of this, it is necessary to consider Maclise's other works. Born in Cork and a member of the Irish Society in London during the 1850s, many of his paintings show an interest in 'Celtic' cultural nationalism and both his depiction of 'Edward I Presenting his Infant Son to the

⁷⁴ Austin, *England's Darling*, p. v.

⁷⁵ Richards, *The Vikings*, p. 123.

⁷⁶ Roy Strong, *And When did you last see your father? The Victorian Painter and British History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 117.

Welsh People' and 'The Marriage of Strongbow and Eva' are works that are critical of military invasion.⁷⁷ There is therefore a good case for reading Alfred in his depiction of the Danish camp not as English but as Irish or more broadly 'Celtic', and the Danes, on the other hand, as the English.

The identity of the Saxons as 'us' is also complicated in Jacob Abbott's 1898 popular history, *Alfred the Great*, which celebrates Alfred's treaty with Guthrum in terms that are strikingly sympathetic to the Vikings:

There were two races in the same island that had been engaged for many years in a fierce and bloody struggle, each gaining at times a temporary victory. The Danes had for many years settled in Britain. Large numbers had quietly settled on agricultural lands. They had become peaceful inhabitants. They had intermarried in some cases with Saxons. Alfred determined to [...] allow those peaceably disposed to remain in quiet possession of such lands [...] as they already occupied.⁷⁸

In this case, it is instructive to learn that Abbott was resident in India at the time that the book was written, and that it was published in Madras, for Indian readers, by the Christian Literature Society for India. Clearly, then, this British author identified not with Alfred and the Saxons but rather with the colonising Danes, and his promotion of peace and inter-racial tolerance should be read in relation to the growing influence of the Indian National Congress in the late nineteenth century.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, several Alfredian novelists also seem to have identified with Alfred's Viking opponents. Gordon Stables' 1898 adventure novel *Twixt Daydawn and Light* begins with a framing narrative in which himself and an Irish friend sail to Iceland. There they learn from an Icelander:

⁷⁷ John Turpin, 'Daniel Maclise' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004). 30 Jan. 2009, www.oxforddnb.com.lib.exeter.ac.uk/view/article/17682.

⁷⁸ Jacob Abbott, *Alfred the Great* (Madras, 1898), p. 36.

Your Anglese, or English, would ignore us, and expunge from the list of their ancestors those very men to whom, as the greatest naval nation in the world, they owe so much, those Vikings stern who first taught Britannia to rule the ocean waves.⁷⁹

This point is reiterated several times in the main narrative which relates the Viking invasions of 878. The Vikings were, Stables asserts ‘neither so cruel nor so vile as the Anglo-Saxons in their chronicles make them out to be’, rather they should be viewed as ‘the germs of all that is best and boldest in our present-day civilisation’.⁸⁰ The Anglo-Saxon, on the other hand, was ‘easily swayed by superstitious reverence for the unknown and invisible power [...] was greedy of money [...] and] had the vices of a barbarian – gluttony and drunkenness’.⁸¹ Alfred is admired – but largely, it seems, on the grounds of the treaty that he forged with Guthrum which Stables claims gave the Vikings ‘one half of the country’.⁸²

The reasons for Stables’ affiliation with the Vikings seem to have been two-fold. On the one hand, having spent several years in the Royal Navy and then the merchant service, he admired the Vikings for their nautical accomplishments.⁸³ So he cannot ‘feel myself altogether in order while calling them pirates. They were simply privateering’.⁸⁴ And he commends their ‘brave hearts’ as ‘the forerunners of those that at the present day beat in the bosoms of every brave and British sailor’.⁸⁵ Secondly, although an inhabitant of England for most of his adult life, Stables was born and raised in Scotland, and for this reason seems to have identified with the Danes as a nation which had, like Scotland, been absorbed in the creation of an ‘Anglo-British’ national identity. The two nations are equated in the novel when

⁷⁹ Gordon Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light: A Tale of the Times of Alfred the Great* (London, 1898), p. 144.

⁸⁰ Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light*, pp. 245, 224.

⁸¹ Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light*, p. 215.

⁸² Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light*, p. 342.

⁸³ G.S. Woods, ‘William Gordon Stables’. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004). 30 Jan. 2009 www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36229.

⁸⁴ Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light*, p. 369.

⁸⁵ Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light*, p. 224.

Stables remarks that, ‘The English [...] termed the Vikings heathen; well, they were certainly not Christians, but they were soldiers. The Scottish Highlanders were also considered barbarians.’⁸⁶ And in the novel’s preface he scoffs at earlier Anglo-Saxonism and introduces his own position:

[...] in the books of English history I have read, I find the authors waxing hysterically happy over every victory they can claim from the ancient Vikings, or “heathen Norsemen”. I smile, because they quite forget that we owe some of the best blood that warms our veins to these “tameless spirits of the past”. [...] In my present tale, then, I have tried – in a pleasant way I hope – to work up to the history of Alfred the Great through the principal foes to his kingdom, the Picts, the Scots, and the so-called Danes.⁸⁷

In the two years following the publication of Stables’ novel, a further two Alfredian novelists depicted the events of 878 from a Viking perspective. Charles Whistler’s 1899 *King Alfred’s Viking* is narrated by a Norwegian, Ranald, who fights for Alfred and teaches the Saxons to establish and command a naval force. More importantly, though, he acts as a cultural intermediary, explaining to the Saxons the social structures of the Vikings. When the Vikings seem to break a treaty with Alfred and ‘the king’s rage is cold and dreadful’, Ranald explains:

Surely you do not look for the men of one chief to be bound by what another promises? [...] If Guthrum chooses to make peace, that is not Halfdan’s business, or Hubba’s, or that of any chief who likes it not. One is as free as the other [...] If they swore by the holy ring, there is no doubt that they who swore would keep the oath. But that does not bind those who were against the peace-making.⁸⁸

Alfred is appeased and amazed by this insight – and the reader too is nurtured away from a view of the Vikings as oath-breakers, derived from Asser and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The novel is a parable of cultural tolerance, and when Ranald is rewarded

⁸⁶ Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light*, p. 293.

⁸⁷ Stables, *Twixt Daydawn and Light*, p. x.

⁸⁸ Charles Whistler, *King Alfred’s Viking* (London, 1899), p. 97.

for his diplomacy at its conclusion by being made ‘leader of the King’s Wessex sea-leivies, offering me the rank and fee of an English Ealdorman’, the parallels with the nineteenth-century Scots and Irish who served in the British navy and colonial administration are difficult to ignore.⁸⁹

Paul Creswick’s *In Ælfred’s Days: A Story of Saga the Dane* also focuses on a figure with divided loyalties. Creswick’s Saga is a Viking child who is adopted by Alfred and brought up with his own son Edward. Like Ranald he acts as a mediator, arguing that ‘the Saxons, just like the Danes, snatched England’.⁹⁰ And like both Ranald and Stables’ Vikings he brings hot-blooded spirit and martial prowess to the Saxon side. He and Alfred’s natural son have complimentary qualities – Creswick relates that ‘Edward might plan a scheme well, but Saga would be there to administer it’.⁹¹ As an author, Creswick was clearly more attracted to Saga, with his mixed heritage, than to Alfred: when he wrote a sequel to the novel a year later, in which Saga visits the country of his birth, the Saxon king was included only as a bit-part in the final chapter. In the absence of any information about Creswick’s own background, it can only be stated with certainty that he was interested in questions of union, hybridity, and mixed nationality – Saga must resist the temptation to betray the Saxons when he learns of his true birth and remain loyal to his adopted nation

The novels of Creswick, Whistler and Stables make it abundantly clear that by the late nineteenth century – even in English literature about the king celebrated as the acme of Anglo-Saxon culture – the Saxons were not always simply represented as ‘us’. In the twentieth century, in the wake of the first and second World Wars, the Anglo-Saxonism of the Victorian period came to be viewed retrospectively as a wholly negative cultural phenomena – associated with racial supremacy, cultural

⁸⁹ Whistler, *King Alfred’s Viking*, p. 284.

⁹⁰ Paul Creswick, *In Ælfred’s Days* (London, 1900), p. 120.

⁹¹ Creswick, *In Ælfred’s Days*, p. 118.

intolerance, and the rise of fascism, and those World Wars were identified as having spelled the end of Britain's unfortunate fascination with the Saxons.⁹² However, if the cult of King Alfred is viewed diachronically across the nineteenth century, I would argue that through the representation of Viking figures in Alfredian texts it is possible to observe not a simplistic nationalism, but rather the newly-forged nation 'Great Britain' gradually coming to terms with its own hybridity and developing a more complex sense of national identity. In particular, the often revisited narrative of Alfred's treaty with Guthrum seems to have lead rewriters inexorably towards investigation of British multiculturalism, so that half a century before the first world war, Anglo-Saxonism was already developing in more culturally inclusive directions.

Without those two world wars, it is arguable that British Anglo-Saxonism might have been resolved into an engagement with Britain's past which embraced the notion of multiple histories, and which could still be viewed in positive terms today. The two world wars did, however, interrupt this development. Today, consequently, Britain remains a country that celebrates its 'Celtic' ancestry, its Viking roots, and the history of its Middle Ages yet is still unwilling to celebrate the Saxon part of its heritage. Between 1914 and 2000, fewer than thirty Alfredian texts were published – while works on Celtic and Viking themes numbered in the thousands.⁹³ It was only at the close of the twentieth century that any real attempt was made to revive King Alfred as a subject of popular interest – in the trilogy of novels by Bernard Cornwell. Cornwell's approach is carefully distant from triumphal Anglo-Saxonism – his Alfred is first encountered moaning and vomiting in an attack of post-coital guilt and his Saxons in general are rule-bound, pale figures who contrast sadly with the colour and

⁹² See Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest*, p. 202.

⁹³ Between 1965 and 1985 alone, over 8,000 books were published concerned with some aspect of the Arthurian legend, for instance.

joie-de-vivre of the Danes.⁹⁴ Yet at the same time his culturally confused Saxon hero who has been raised by the Danes is clearly the offspring of Creswick's Saga, Whistler's Ranald and, yet further back, the Danish-Saxon marriages that conclude so many mid-nineteenth-century Alfredian texts. And the questions which this post-modern hero asks are really not so very different from those posed by those earlier mediators, or even by Maclise's pensive Guthrum: 'Northumbrian or Dane? Which was I? What did I want to be?'⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Bernard Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom* (London: 2005), p. 79.

⁹⁵ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, p. 55.