

# **NORTHERN STUDIES**

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Northern studies by Edmund Gosse

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**EDMUND GOSSE**

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By EDMUND GOSSE.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE.

THE new interest that has grown up lately among us here in England, in the history and literature of the North, is remarkable. One of the three first of our living English poets has thrown the whole weight of his poetry into the revival, with characteristic energy, and his *Sigurd the Volsung* serves well to typify what it was that first drew us to the fresh ground offered by the North to the imagination. It was, I suppose, with a certain romantic sense of the past represented by the heroic figure of Sigurd, that most of us first turned to the poetry of Norway and its fellow countries. But our interest is clearly leading us a long way when it brings us from Sigurd the Volsung to the modern Dr. Stockmann, of Ibsen's *En Folkefiende*, and to other such types of the contemporary Norseman. Indeed some critics, like Mr. Robert Buchanan, who have loved the romantic North not a little, resent greatly that the law of painful development from old to new should be at work here too. It is a wiser spirit surely, that, recognising fully all the old romance, and making much of the past, has yet wished to face the present, and has given us these *Northern Studies*, in which we find traced with so much sympathy and charm some of the modern developments of Scandinavian literature.

The growth and movement of Dano-Norwegian poetry, and its readjustment under modern, difficult conditions, have a closer interest for us in some ways than the changes in any other literature of modern Europe. Volsung and Niblung, Warrior and Viking and Skald, Norseman and Dane, were, as we remember, our forefathers. Whether we agree with Canon Taylor or not in removing the seed-ground of our race from Asia

to Finland, the fact of our descent through Norse and Danish blood remains of course the same. Thus it comes that there is a peculiar interest for us, in tracing how the undiluted native, Northern stock, from which we sprang, is affected in its growth and conscious expression of itself at home to-day, by later influences, as of Commerce, the *Bourgeois* Sentiment, international criticism, and so forth. In its readjustment to these awkward new demands we may find, as Mr. Gosse points out, a striking correspondence to our own literary attitude and predicament, and find it all the more because we feel that in many ways these Northern poets and writers have a racial affinity to ourselves, and show in their work certain tendencies to good and bad that are quite singularly like our own. In Hansen, Wergeland, Welhaven, Munch, Ashj rnson—not to speak of still later living writers, whose work has yet to be fully measured—we see curious, and often as it were satirical, reflections of the noble company of Victorian poets and rhymesters who have so often beguiled us, more or less successfully, into admiring their good and bad qualities.

All these things, however, are so admirably told by Mr. Gosse in his various reports of the writers of the North, that there is really little need to do more than suggest them in this preamble. Better perhaps that one should try and recall, as a test and measure of poetical values, before turning to his pages, something of the ancient spirit of the race and its early poetry. Fortunately we have already in this Camelot Series the very best expression of that spirit that we could possibly have, in the *Volsunga Saga*, in which, to quote a line from Mr. Morris's prologue—

“The very heart of the North bloomed into song.”

Some passage out of the chapters that tell Sigurd's story in the *Volsunga Saga* may recall better than anything else that ancient spirit of fire and storm and the sword; as, for example, this which tells how he found Brynhild asleep in her castle on the mountain:—“By long roads,” says the Saga, “rides Sigurd till he comes at the last up on to Hindfell, and wends his way

south to the land of the Franks ; and he sees before him on the fell a great light, as of fire burning, and flaming up even unto the heavens ; and when he came thereto, lo, a shield-hung castle before him, and a banner on the topmost thereof : into the castle went Sigurd, and saw one lying there asleep, and all-armed. Therewith he takes the helm from the head of him, and sees that it is no man, but a woman." So begins one of the noblest love-stories ever told, which has fascinated so many poets besides him who first told it, and him who first translated it into English for us.

With such associations as this and other episodes of the *Volsunga Saga* call up, we will do well to surround the new North of Björnson and Ibsen, if we wish to measure its contemporary activities in literature by its past.

We will do well to recall too other men of the same race and spirit—Halfdan the Swarthy, Harold the Fairhaired, Erik, Haakon the Good, and other kings of Norway down to Sverre Sigurdsson, in whom the instincts of democrat and aristocrat seemed so finely mingled, "in point of genius greatest of all." For the political life of Norway has been closely allied throughout with its literary development, and in our own English political life, and in our English literature, we owe very much to Norse and to Norman invasion. For, as one historian of Norway, Mr. Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, himself a native of the country, now living in America and writing in English—a striking instance, let us note in passing, of our international literary amenities—has put it, "These tall, blonde men, with their defiant blue eyes, who obeyed their kings while they had confidence in them, and killed their kings when they had forfeited respect, were the ancestors of the Normans who, under William the Conqueror, invaded England."

But this is a schoolboy's tale. Indeed it is so familiar that we are likely to overlook it, with other familiar things in old English history, which yet have a considerable light to throw upon contemporary literature, if we would but realise it. So, at any rate, remembering Viking and Norman, and remembering in the earliest twilight of history, when history is indeed