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RECENT THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

LEGENDS OF DANISH HEROES

So far as subject-matter is concerned this book¹ will run no water on the wheel of the student of comparative religion, though written by a master of that craft, but it turns loose a flood of method. When the Grimms and their school studied a group of heroic or religious traditions they sought to discard all but the oldest attainable form and apply all their acumen to it, as if in the hope of some day attaining something ultimate, a method which had behind it the unconscious presupposition of a golden age when God spoke face to face with man and presented him with final truth which a later age had darkened with foolish council. Svend Grundtvig found the true task of the student of traditions in studying their development from the earliest to the latest versions, in watching the creators of traditions at their work, and the ultimate task in formulating the laws by which they worked. This method is illustrated in his great work, *Danmarks gamle folkeviser (The Ancient Ballads of Denmark)*, and was employed by Child in his *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. If Jakob Grimm had done such a piece of work he would have regarded the various versions of a ballad as so much material out of which to "reconstruct" a theoretical primitive form. What would not fit into this would be but chips on his floor. Grundtvig regarded every version as of value and in his work printed one manuscript of each *in extenso*. Olrik, Grundtvig's gifted pupil, has followed the path of his master and given us in this book an example of this method at its best.

It is a translation and revision of the first volume of a series of three dealing with one great group of Danish legendary heroic lore. The first volume appeared in 1903, the second in 1911, but the appearance of the third has been delayed by the death of the author. It is, however, to be hoped that it will yet be published. This volume deals with the traditions of the elder series of Scylding kings and their subordinate heroes, and it is of interest to English-speaking peoples because it deals

¹ *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*. By Axel Olrik. Translated from the Danish and revised in collaboration with the author by Lee M. Hollander. New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1919. xvii+530 pages.

immediately with the *Beowulf*, indeed it is the best available commentary on the action of a great part of that poem.

The sources for the study are found in *Beowulf*; in ancient lays, some of them preserved only in Latin versions by Saxo Grammaticus, others in Old Norse; in distinctly Danish traditions found in the Danish chronicles (Sven Aggison and Saxo); in twelfth-century Norwegian sagas used by Saxo, being mostly viking tales from western Norway; and in a number of Icelandic monuments.

Olrik is a critical scholar, but, as a really great scholar, also a poet, and with loving care and poetic insight he arranges these sources in their right order and unfolds them before us so that we see how they developed. He shows how the English took over a body of traditions into which they put their earnest subjectiveness, how the original Danish parent stem shows the striking Danish sense for reality, how the Norwegians took over a body of traditions to which they gave the bursting wealth of their imagination, and how the Icelanders became the editors of traditions and applied to them their power of organization and sense of proportion, elsewhere unapproached in the Middle Ages.

But the best of the book for us, and the student of any traditional lore should come to Olrik to learn of him this, which sounds so simple and yet is so difficult to attain, is that he shows in detail how traditions develop out of themselves. Here is a tag end which is unfinished, a situation which could be developed further, something suddenly appearing in the middle of a tale with no explanation of its origin, an interesting hero who might well go through more adventures. These all are so many challenges to the next narrators. They finish the tag end, develop the situation, explain the origin, deck out the hero until he eclipses his lord, but they add strangely little that is new; it is but the re-working of old ideas. Scyld of olden times fares forth dead on the waters, his boat laden with treasure. "Men, hall-rulers, heroes under heaven, could not truly say who received that burden" (*Beowulf*, l. 50). Centuries later the Norwegians add to the Scylding legends the tale of Sigurth Ring, the old king who after battle puts on his ship the body of his poisoned young love, decks his craft with the corpses of the best of the fallen heroes, sails out on the sea, sets fire to his ship, and slays himself. The old was mysterious, vague, solemn, in the form we have it, English; the new is magnificent, plastic, Norwegian, but it is the same tale retold, a tradition developed out of itself. It was from the collection of such phenomena that Olrik sought elsewhere to develop the laws of epic growth.

Dr. Hollander's excellent introduction and translation are evidently a labor of love.

The American-Scandinavian Foundation is to be thanked for putting this book before the English-speaking public.

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THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH¹

These two volumes form the first half of a work in four volumes. They are a part of a series of religious histories entitled the "World Worships Series." The four volumes devoted to Christianity are to carry the history "to the close of the Reform Period." The present volumes extend to the establishment of the Papal Autocracy or 1250. On account of the extent of the work it may be well to give it more notice than at first sight one would deem needed. In the first place, the book is written without references to sources—not a mortal sin, but frequently inconvenient where views are sometimes distinctly unusual. It is apparently based upon easily accessible works of modern writers. Sometimes they are mentioned by name; sometimes they are apparently quoted without more reference than quotation marks. But nowhere is there reference to volume and page. As an indication of some of the nuggets of historical wisdom which may be found in the book, which one would in no respect lay to the charge of the writers most used, Moeller, Milman, A. V. G. Allen, Emerton, and Gwatkin, the following, taken quite at random, may suffice. "These [the Syriac recension of the Ignatian Epistles] are in a much shorter form than that previously accepted. They are now pretty generally recognized as the only genuine Ignatian Epistles" (Vol. I, p. 135). Yet only two pages later are to be found two quotations from Ignatius which are not in the Syriac but from the short Greek recension, concluding with this statement as to the teaching of Ignatius, "Upon careful reading of the genuine epistles of Ignatius it will appear that there is not a single statement to throw any light upon the views of the author touching the Incarnation of Jesus or his divinity." As to the position of the bishop in the third century we are told: "The powers of the bishop grew continually. His was the ordaining power, but he usually delegated this to the presbyters" (p. 241). Now this is interesting,

¹ *The History of Christianity*. By Andrew Stephenson. Vols. I and II. Boston: Badger, 1919. 325 and 320 pages. \$7.50.