



Merlin Turville-Petre

G. TURVILLE-PETRE

GABRIEL TURVILLE-PETRE¹

1908-1978

GABRIEL TURVILLE-PETRE was born on 25 March 1908. He was educated at Ampleforth and Christ Church, Oxford. He was appointed to the newly founded Vigfússon Readership in Ancient Icelandic Literature and Antiquities at Oxford in 1941, but spent the war years in the Foreign Office and did not take up the post until 1946. He was given the title of Professor in the field of his readership in 1953, and elected Student of Christ Church in 1964. He retired in 1975. During the last ten years of his life cancer of lung and lower jaw enfeebled his body but not his mind; until it set both at rest on 17 February 1978.

Other appointments he held were those of Lektor in English at the University of Iceland, 1936-8 (for the latter part of that time he was British pro-consul in Reykjavík as well); Honorary Lecturer in Modern Icelandic, University of Leeds, 1935-50; Visiting Professor, University of Melbourne, 1965; Honorary Research Fellow, University College London, 1975-8. He was General Editor with Sigurður Nordal of the four volumes of saga texts and translations put out by Nelson in their series called *Icelandic Texts* (1959-65). A number of Icelandic and Scandinavian academies elected him to membership, and the University of Iceland made him *dr phil. h.c.* in 1961, and the University of Uppsala *fil. dr h.c.* in 1977. The President of Iceland appointed him Officer of the Order of the Falcon in 1956, Commander in 1963.

Turville-Petre was closely associated with the Viking Society for Northern Research, to whose Council he was first elected in 1936. In 1939 he became Joint Honorary Secretary and Joint Editor of the *Saga-Book*; he gave up the latter post in 1963 but held the former until his death. He published numerous papers, reviews, translations, and editions for the Society, and was also General Editor of its text and monograph series inaugurated in 1953. The Society made him one of its twelve Honorary Life

¹ In preparing this paper I have gratefully benefited from the good advice of Mrs J. E. Turville-Petre and Mr A. R. Taylor. It may be noted that a full bibliography of Turville-Petre's writings is expected to appear in *Saga-Book*, xx 2 (1979).

Members in 1956. In 1972 it presented him with *Nine Norse Studies*, a selection of papers by him written between 1940 and 1962. And in 1976 the Society instituted an annual Turville-Petre Prize for award in Oxford to a student distinguished in 'Northern Research'.

A *Festschrift* was in preparation for his seventieth birthday under the editorship of an international panel led by Mrs Ursula Dronke, his successor in the Vigfússon Readership. It is now (March 1979) in course of publication as a memorial volume by Odense University Press.

At Oxford Turville-Petre read English and was particularly interested in philological and medieval subjects, a natural extension of his boyhood discovery of Iceland and its early literature. His first visit to Iceland was made as an undergraduate, and between taking his degree in 1931 and his lectureship in Reykjavík, he pursued Icelandic and Norse studies on several more visits to the country. He also spent some time in Germany and Scandinavia, where he met the most accomplished and influential scholars in the Norse field and became the firm friend of many of them. In these years he laid the foundations of his sovereign understanding of both classical Icelandic and the modern language—the latter he commanded in speech and writing to the admiration of Icelanders and the envy of foreigners. Probably his most important teacher was Þórbergur Þórðarson (1888–1974), famous as an extraordinarily versatile writer, lively, humorous, and idiosyncratic; but Turville-Petre also spent long periods in the countryside, particularly on farms in the north and remote east of Iceland, learning all the time. By 1933 he had also begun the study of Irish, to which he later added Welsh; and his reading in the early literature in these languages was to give him a range of reference of decisive importance for his subsequent contributions to the study of Norse mythology and poetics. Perhaps it might be added that it is no drawback for a medievalist to be brought up in a traditional Catholic family and school. A familiarity with scripture, liturgy, saints' lives, a sympathy for great churchmen of the calm and liberal kind, and a certain horror of 'enthusiasm', can be detected in his writings. Such moulding would obviously fit him for the appreciation of many aspects of early western Christian culture and its assimilation in the converted countries of the North. In a peculiar way it may also have fitted him for the appreciation of many aspects of the character and experience of the Icelanders, among whom

some of the coolest and sharpest intelligences have, still at the present day, a serious, deep-rooted interest in the paranormal and supernatural, without any trace of *Schwärmerei* whatsoever.

There is no doubt that he was the ideal candidate for the Vigfússon Readership in 1941, and he had demonstrated his qualifications in a number of papers which had proved his clear-headed ability in manuscript and text comparison and his notable interest in pagan religion. These largely stemmed from his graduate work on an edition of *Víga-Glúms saga*, which was published in 1940 as the first of the Oxford English Monograph series. That edition set the highest standards for future contributions to saga studies in the world outside Iceland, with its emphatic intention to serve 'the student of literature and cultural history as well as of linguistics'. The range of book-learning in many languages, the perspicuity and honesty of the comment, the feel for the story and characters, and the personal familiarity with the topography—learnt from trudging the sites and riding the valleys and passes—gave it unusual distinction. It also brought to the notice of English academics more cogently than had been done hitherto the new approaches to Icelandic saga literature developed especially by Björn Magnússon Ólsen and his successor at the University of Iceland, Sigurður Nordal. In *Víga-Glúms saga* Turville-Petre detected a theme and motives that appear archaic—belief in fate, competition between cult of Freyr and cult of Óðinn—but these are partly obscured in the story we know. Turville-Petre regarded this as the work of an artist who had 'genuine historical sources', some written, some oral (and we have no means of determining the form of the latter). Using criteria of composition, language, style, and literary influence, members of the 'Icelandic school' assigned sagas to places in an organic system. They argued that saga-writing began about 1200 with a comparatively unsophisticated narrative like *Heiðarvíga saga*, flowered about 1250 with the consummate, deliberate artistry of *Laxdæla saga*, and declined slowly thereafter, with the best-known of sagas, *Njáls saga*, written about 1280, a masterpiece on the edge 'between ripeness and overripeness', as Nordal has put it. Following this method, Turville-Petre dates *Víga-Glúms saga* to c.1230–40—the original text of it, that is, for Turville-Petre was able to show, ingeniously and persuasively, that that oldest text had first been expanded by interpolation and then compressed by stylistic recasting and minor excision to give us the only complete medieval version we possess, in the codex *Möðruvallabók*, written about 1350.

These conclusions stand without serious challenge, though scholars have recently been doubting the aptness of the organic analogy in the progress of saga literature, not least because it ignores the artistic levels that may have been achieved in oral story-telling. There are evident problems in attempting to talk in comparative terms about the original work of an artist which we know only in a recension that was at least twice edited in the century or more between date of composition and date of codex.

The edition was thus a contribution of decided merit to international Norse scholarship and much more than a textbook of local interest. But in some respects it was of special significance for scholarship this side of the North Sea because of its discussion of recent Scandinavian research then not well known here (Koht's 'new' chronology of late ninth-century Norwegian events, for example) and because of some criticism of *Origines Islandicæ*, the monumental source-book put together by York Powell on the basis of Guðbrandur Vigfússon's materials but published long after the latter's death and a year after York Powell's own—a work that should be kept away from anyone unable to undertake an independent check of what it offers.

That it was high time that some ray of light pierced the complacent ignorance about Icelandic studies in which many British scholars were content to linger was shown to the full by an article which C. L. Wrenn, then Professor of English at King's College, London, published in *History* in 1941.¹ His main subject was the famous Cynewulf-Cyneheard passage *s.a.* 755 in the *Parker Chronicle* as illustrative of Old English 'saga', but he introduced it with some inept comment on the wartime political situation of the Icelanders with the end of the union with Denmark in sight and with some extraordinary misinformation about Icelandic literacy in the early middle ages, claiming that writing did not become common there until late in the thirteenth century. That this was at least 150 years wide of the mark was shown in a crushing rejoinder which Turville-Petre published in the same journal in 1942.² In a dozen pages of 'Notes on the intellectual history of the Icelanders' he presented the facts of the Icelanders' conversion in A.D. 1000, the comparatively rapid organization of the Icelandic Church, the pursuit of education abroad, the development of native schools and monasteries, the vast amount of translation and adaptation, from about 1100 onwards, of foreign ecclesiastic and other

¹ 'A Saga of the Anglo-Saxons', *History*, xxv (1941), 208–15.

² *History*, xxvii (1942), 111–23.

literature and learning, the independent contribution of twelfth-century Icelandic scholars in grammar and computus, in the preservation and practice of native poetry, and in vernacular and Latin history writing. All this intellectual activity preceded the writing of sagas, which belonged essentially to the thirteenth century, and it totally belied the analogy of a fixed oral tradition in a primitive pre-literate Germanic society which Wrenn had wished to draw. There could be no reply to this. In retrospect one may even feel grateful to Wrenn for provoking the publication of Turville-Petre's paper, for it gave students an admirably concise and expert guide to the background of medieval Icelandic literature of a kind nowhere else available.

But controversy was not Turville-Petre's way in general. It was in keeping that when he read work submitted to him he did not correct by re-writing or annotating at length: a question mark in the margin was his usual way of suggesting that fresh consideration or better learning was needed. He had little patience with people he counted charlatans (and he could be amusingly malicious about them); but to the genuine, thinking enthusiast, academic or amateur (as many members of the Viking Society would testify), he responded with the greatest tolerance and kindness. He was a good teacher, particularly successful as a supervisor of the graduate scholars who in the last twenty years of his tenure in Oxford came to him from all over the world. Pupils of his are now in university posts in nine or ten different countries. He ended a paper given in Sweden in 1969 by saying of Australia, 'I think the future of Icelandic studies in the English-speaking world lies there.'¹ He visited Australia three times in his last years, and found the eager alertness of his Melbourne classes particularly stimulating. If his prophecy proves true—and I hope it does not—it will be largely because of his influence.

In 1942 Turville-Petre also published with E. S. Olszewska (Mrs A. S. C. Ross) a translation of an early Icelandic life of Guðmundr Arason, bishop of Hólar (1203–37),² with a perceptive introduction on early Christianity in Iceland and the personal and political complexities that made Guðmund's episcopate so disastrous. It is clear that Turville-Petre found Guðmund's contemporary of Skálholt, the aristocratic, cultivated, and moderate Bishop Páll Jónsson, the more admirable

¹ *Proceedings of the Sixth Viking Congress, Uppsala . . . Bonäs . . . 1969*, edited by Peter Foote and Dag Strömbäck (1971), 114.

² *The Life of Gudmund the Good, Bishop of Holar* (Viking Society, 1942).

character and perhaps in essence the more genuine Icelander, a judgement reflected in his views in other fields of Icelandic study.

In 1944 he published an essay on Gísli Súrsson and his poetry,¹ a theme which gave him an opportunity to engage the diverse predilections already apparent in earlier work: scaldic poetry, its nature, quality and dating, dreams and dream symbols (a lifelong interest on which he was to publish some valuable papers), the mingling of pagan and Christian concepts, valkyries and fetches and angels, good and bad (other papers written about the same time confirm his wide reading in international folklore). When he reprinted his paper on *Gísla saga* in *Nine Norse Studies*, he added a note on work published on that text in the intervening thirty years, and then typically proceeded to solve a crux as much by applying his knowledge of ornithology (another lifelong enthusiasm) as his knowledge of philology. It had been universally assumed that a word *læmingr* in a verse in the saga had given rise to a misunderstanding in the prose story—the writer apparently took it to be a bird and this everybody agreed was impossible. Turville-Petre showed that there was no misunderstanding and that the author of the prose was right to describe a bird identifiable as the red-throated diver (*colymbus stellatus*) for which a word **læmingr* is appropriate and natural (cf. English *loom*, and perhaps *loon*, from ON *lómr*).

In 1951 Turville-Petre published *The Heroic Age of Scandinavia* in Hutchinson's University Library, a succinct and clear account of Scandinavia in the Migration Age and Viking Age, its legends and history. Naturally the archaeology available was all pre-war, and some chapters now need revision. What is of abiding interest is the author's considered opinion on the significance of medieval Icelandic literature as a source of information about much earlier times. His approach is sensible and supple, judiciously pragmatic, rather than the wholesale rejection fashionable among Scandinavian historians, though he fully understands that a composite picture created from an eclectic use of sources without reference to age, genre, and literary history is unacceptable. He especially stresses that poems and stories are not merely valuable for what they may record of the past but are themselves cultural witnesses of independent worth and influence. He has no difficulty in persuading the reader

¹ 'Gísli Súrsson and his Poetry', *Modern Language Review*, xxxix (1944), 374-91.

that the legends and cult of St Óláfr, for example, have had far more significance in the course of Norwegian history than the actual fifteen years of the king's reign. This survey of legendary history and the poetry associated with it helped him to provide authoritative comment on *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, one of the most peculiar and in parts most archaic of the so-called *fornaldarsögur*, which he published with Christopher Tolkien in 1956.¹

With these works and with a couple of important papers on twelfth-century religious literature—on an early vernacular life of the Blessed Virgin (1947) and the Norwegian-Icelandic dedication homily (1949)²—he was now prepared to make his major contribution to our understanding of early Icelandic civilization in *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, published by the Clarendon Press in 1953 (second edition 1967). The book may be said to have been there *in nuce* in his response to Wrenn in 1942, but his varied special studies in the intervening ten years, not least a thorough reading of the great corpus of medieval Icelandic religious literature, much of it of twelfth-century origin, gave his work weight and wisdom on an altogether different scale. With good cause it has proved the most influential of all his writings.

In the first paragraph of *Origins* Turville-Petre says that the Icelanders in their 'poor, isolated island', the last permanent settlement of the Vikings, not only preserved ancient tradition but devised new literary forms—and the literature of Iceland thus became the richest and most varied of medieval Europe'. It is this mystery with which his book is concerned. He reviews the settlement in the decades around 900, and is inclined to believe that Celtic elements in the population contributed certain 'intellectual and imaginative qualities' to the native breed. He describes the mythological and heroic poetry of the Eddaic kind, and rightly maintains that a knowledge of these poems is essential for an understanding of the medieval Icelandic mentality. In discussing scaldic poetry he finds that the kennings, which are especially distinctive, have an essentially 'pictorial' (perhaps 'imagistic' would be a better word) base,

¹ *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* with notes and glossary by G. Turville-Petre, introduction by Christopher Tolkien (Viking Society Text Series, ii, 1956, reprinted 1976).

² 'The Old Norse Homily on the Assumption and the *Mariu Saga*', *Mediaeval Studies*, ix (1947), 131–40; 'The Old Norse Homily on the Dedication', *ibid.*, xi (1949), 206–18. Both papers are reprinted, the latter with a postscript, in *Nine Norse Studies* (1972).

but stresses that their allusive nature requires an audience trained in mythology and heroic legend to appreciate them. In discussing the complex metres of the scalds, he refers to the possibility of Irish influence on the development of *dróttkvætt*, the favourite form.

He goes on to discuss the conversion of the Icelanders to Christianity in the year 1000 (or more probably 999). He argues that, since the Icelanders were already an uprooted people who had only recently devised their own form of self-government and social organization, the new religion did not entail a great social or cultural revolution: chieftains under the pagan dispensation remained chieftains under the Christian dispensation. There was no brutal severance with the past and though the gradual spiritual alteration affected the Icelanders' attitude toward their ancestral paganism, it did not lead to radical, intolerant rejection of their early culture. In treating the progress of Christianity in the eleventh century, he stresses the importance of the English connection and of the longstanding tradition of vernacular literature among the Anglo-Saxons and Irish (concomitant North German influence is probably unduly neglected). He gives an account of the earliest known writers, Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056–1133) and Ari Þorgilsson (1067–1148), paying special attention to the latter's connection with the famous *Landnámabók*, Book of Settlements, on the ancestors and descendants of the first prominent settlers in Iceland and the land they took into ownership. We know this in extant or reconstructed thirteenth-century versions but Ari is reliably said to have played some part in recording such information. If matter in *Landnámabók* can be traced to a recording by Ari, it will carry impressive weight, for from his known work Ari appears as a scrupulous historian. But if matter in *Landnámabók* depends on what was in oral circulation in the thirteenth century, it can hardly be taken seriously as a historical source. For historians who were not abreast of recent years' discussion of these problems—much of it in Icelandic—this was and is a particularly useful and well-judged exposition.

In a chapter called 'The school of Hólar and early religious prose' he considers the division of Iceland into two dioceses at the outset of the twelfth century, and the work and monastic foundations of the northern bishops. He discusses with easy familiarity the homilies, saints' lives, apocryphal stories, and doctrinal lore that were translated and adapted, often in a far from slavish way, in this early period. His lifelong experience

could build new bridges between the Icelandic texts and the English and continental sources; and from his middle-ground vantage point he could make a reasoned assessment of the significance of the early religious writings for the whole development of the extraordinary literary art of medieval Iceland. He summed it up: 'In a word, the learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it' (p. 142). The truth of this axiom has now been generally accepted—though it remains an article of faith for proof of which wholly satisfactory tests have not yet been devised. In recent years some saga-scholars have displayed more enthusiasm for structural and formulaic studies and have resurrected the theory of oral 'saga-like' stories which they believe existed in a form sufficiently fixed in the pre-literate age to have decisive influence on the composition of the classical saga-literature. Like members of the Icelandic school in general Turville-Petre tended to discount oral story-telling—not because it did not exist and was a source for saga-writers, but because it is irrecoverable. (It is a rare lapse of Turville-Petre's customary rigour that he frequently prefixes the phrase 'oral tales' with the rather misleading adjective 'formless'—by which he means that he believes we cannot know what they were like but assumes they were shifting.)

Having discussed the remarkable poetry of the early Christian period, he turns to the historical literature of the late twelfth century—native Icelandic hagiography and ecclesiastical history, along with the earliest lives of the Christian kings of Norway, Óláfr Tryggvason, apostle of Norway and Iceland, and St Óláfr Haraldsson. He effectively, but perhaps too unreservedly, contrasts the literary manner that flourished in the northern diocese of Hólar with that of Skálholt in the south, passing with some relief from the 'breathless hagiography' of the Benedictine Gunnlaugr Leifsson in the one to the calmer church chronicles composed by cathedral clergy in the other. In his conclusion on the genesis of the so-called 'oldest saga of St Óláfr' he is able to draw the main strands of his book together in a neat and sturdy knot. The material came from poetry and many kinds of story—the scaldic verse and the anecdotes that went with it were part of the secular heritage and provided the work's basis in history; the king's pre-eminence as martyr, miracle-worker, and *rex perpetuus Norvegiae* depended chiefly on what was cultivated, remembered, and recorded among churchmen; folktale and wondertale elements

were variously of Norse origin or migratory, clerical or lay. The native traditions were cast, however, in a foreign form adapted from European biography and hagiography.¹ The result was a new and productive vernacular literary mode: under the influence of hagiography there developed the saga of the royal saint; that gave rise to the Kings' Sagas that preceded Snorri's classic works; and Kings' Sagas prompted the first composition of Sagas of Icelanders.

Turville-Petre added an 'epilogue' on the classical saga literature, more at the desire of the publisher than because he thought the book needed it. He reviewed the Kings' Sagas and related texts that were written before Snorri composed his *Óláfs saga helga* and *Heimskringla*. Attribution to Snorri of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (which now seems generally accepted) led him to brief discussion of a dozen of the more important Sagas of Icelanders. He says many sound things, but criticism of individual sagas in literary terms was not a prime interest—he has left us little beyond his important comment on *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Gísla saga* and a short introduction he wrote for a reprint of Dasent's translation of *Njáls saga*. On the whole, he thought, like others of us, that it was for the alert student to discover literary qualities for himself. It is typical enough that in this last chapter of *Origins* he puts twenty lines of *Morkinskinna* against forty lines from *Heimskringla*, with only half a sentence of precedent comment.

Turville-Petre's most ambitious and substantial undertaking was his *Myth and Religion of the North*, published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson in 1964 in their History of Religion series. His papers on the cult of Freyr (1936) and on the cult of Óðinn in Iceland (1958), on Thurstable (1962), and on the *landðisir* (1963),² and a number of reviews, had all shown his deep interest in Norse paganism. These contributions, typically combining solid learning and imaginative insight, were all on special subjects. Now it was necessary to provide a compre-

¹ For an important textual difficulty see however Jonna Louis-Jensen in *Opuscula* iv (Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana, xxx, 1970), 59–60.

² 'The Cult of Freyr in the Evening of Paganism', *Proceedings of Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, iii (1935), 317–33; 'Um Óðinsdyrkan á Íslandi', *Studia Islandica*, xvii (1958), 5–25 (in English in *Nine Norse Studies*, 1972); 'Thurstable', *English and Medieval Studies presented to J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by N. Davis and C. L. Wrenn (1962), 241–9 (reprinted in *Nine Norse Studies*, 1972); 'A Note on the Landðisir', *Early English and Norse Studies presented to Hugh Smith*, edited by A. Brown and P. Foote (1963), 196–201.

hensive survey of the sources and the major divinities, to sort out the significance of the scraps of information that tell of warring divine tribes, the gods' constant struggle with monstrous powers, and their final doom, and to discuss such diverse topics as ancestor worship and reincarnation, chthonic spirits, godless men, heroes and demi-gods, berserks, cult buildings, disposal of the dead, and more besides. As a handbook full of reliable information (though marred by all too many printing errors) about what the sources tell us—including judiciously appropriate reference to English, Celtic, Baltic, and continental Germanic material—and with much fruitful discussion and skilful synthesis, it is an authoritative work unrivalled by anything else in English. But dissension over the trustworthiness of some of his sources and over the validity of his source-criticism is likely to live for some time yet.

The position was that many earlier scholars had decided that the mythological stories told by Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda*, and on a smaller scale in *Ynglinga saga*, both written about 1220, were largely literary invention and that he knew little more about Norse paganism than we did. It was as a source of arguments against this judgement that Turville-Petre found the writings of Professor Georges Dumézil particularly interesting and stimulating. The great *comparatist* in the field of Indo-European religious studies had begun writing about Norse mythology in the thirties, and Turville-Petre had to come to grips with these and later contributions and with Dumézil's central theory of the 'tripartite' structure of Indo-European society reflected in the functions of the divine hierarchies recognized in worship. He published a sympathetic account of three of Dumézil's books in *Saga-Book*, xiv, 1–2 (1953–5), invited him to lecture in Oxford in 1956, and wrote an article on 'Professor Dumézil and the literature of Iceland' in *Hommages à Georges Dumézil* (1960). In these essays and in *Myth and Religion* he makes little of the 'tripartite' theory, though he reports it faithfully where he finds it appropriate. His detachment is in notable contrast to the wholehearted application of Dumézil's scheme by Jan de Vries in the second edition of his valuable *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (1956–7). Turville-Petre's lack of commitment stemmed partly from modesty in the face of the Indo-European dimension, and partly from caution dictated by the fact that the theory, whatever its Indo-European validity, does not always helpfully fit or explain the state of Viking Age religion and society as we can observe it in our

best sources. Turville-Petre's own research itself tended to support the view that some important features of Norse religion were decidedly late and local in character. Óðinn may have been an archaic divinity, for example, but his cult appears to have been unknown or insignificant in Western Scandinavia until made prominent by aggressive warlords, typified by Haraldr hárfagri, in the ninth century.

Turville-Petre frankly acknowledges that his main debt of gratitude to Dumézil is because his learned and ingenious comparative studies demonstrate the credibility of Snorri's stories. For Dumézil had shown that in a number of cases where scholars could point to no original or analogue in the Norse or Germanic world and had decided to ignore what Snorri said, some parallel in classical or Hindu or other system of myth suggested that Snorri's account must be derived from an antique source authentically preserved. Turville-Petre is of course fully aware that Snorri had a Christian viewpoint, was a learned euhemerist and a not wholly reverent humorist; but making allowance for all this, he insists that Snorri's accounts must and can be taken seriously. He makes the ancient poetry the first foundation-stone of his study and Snorri the second. Besides these he beds a third also conventionally regarded as of dubious reliability. Turville-Petre points out that tales of the *fornaldarsaga* kind often contain matter attributable to pre-Christian legend and religion. We know such texts, and the poetry some of them contain, only in versions from the late thirteenth century and after. But it was on such stories that Saxo Grammaticus in Denmark, writing before and about 1200, based the early books of his great *Gesta Danorum*, largely, it is believed, on the authority of Icelandic informants. Turville-Petre consequently turns as readily to Saxo as to Snorri in his search for pieces to complete the puzzle: Saxo gives, for example, a remarkable account of Baldr and endows him with characteristics quite different from those he possesses in West Norse tradition, while for the story of Haddingus Saxo is virtually our sole source.

The methodological importance of these approaches has yet to be accepted and assimilated. As Turville-Petre is the first to point out, they represent not so much a novelty as a return to the attitudes of nineteenth-century philologists and historians of religion. They certainly make Norse sources more fun to deal with, but few scholars combine the precise understanding of the Icelandic sources with the sane but imaginatively sympathetic breadth of vision of Turville-Petre, and without the

two it is not easy to give full and serious consideration to the sum and scheme of his interpretations. What we need perhaps is a series of slimmer volumes each devoted to one of the many topics he tackled with such boldness and insight. The studies that are required are unfortunately not much in vogue at present, when younger scholars seem chiefly concerned with manuscript minutiae or are happily blinkered by methods of source-criticism that are valid for documentary history but less appropriate for study of a transitional period between non-literate and literate cultural stages.

In virtually all his work Turville-Petre had been engaged with scaldic poetry, the verse which in many ways is the most characteristic and challenging product of early Norse culture, analysing the verse of individual poets in his studies of *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Gísla saga*, examining its distinctive nature and early history in *Origins*, and assessing its value as a source of mythological and historical information, not least in *Myth and Religion*. In *Origins* he referred to the possibility of Celtic influence on the genesis of the chief scaldic metre, *dróttkvætt*, and in 1954 he published an important paper in Icelandic on the subject¹ (in English in *Ériu*, xxii, 1971, reprinted in *Nine Norse Studies*, 1972). Here he skilfully examined the evidence and found striking similarities between the Norse and Celtic forms, although final proof of connection was not forthcoming. In the last years of his life he turned more and more to this fascinating field, and it was a great stimulus to him to discover that students in Oxford and perhaps even more in Melbourne enjoyed wrestling with the intricacies of scaldic verse and did not find the apparent a-naturalism of diction and syntax a stumbling-block to its appreciation as poetry. He remarks that 'the names of two British poets, whom students admired, came up repeatedly in comparison. These poets were Dylan Thomas and, much more frequently, Gerard Manley Hopkins.'² In several essays he reflected on the rewards of the study of scaldic poetry, on the reality of its aesthetic appeal, and on the relationship between verses and the prose narratives in which they are preserved. In the Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture which he gave in University College London in 1966³ he presented

¹ 'Um dróttkvæði og írskan kveðskap', *Skirnir*, cxxviii (1954), 31-55.

² *Proceedings of the Sixth Viking Congress, Uppsala . . . Bonäs . . . 1969*, edited by Peter Foote and Dag Strömbäck (1971), 109.

³ *Haraldr the Hard-ruler and his Poets* (The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies . . . 1966; 1968).

remarkable portraits of King Haraldr harðráði, who seems to have been as famous among the Icelanders as a critic and practitioner of scaldic poetry as he was among the Norwegians as a warlike adventurer of harsh breed, and the chief Icelandic poets of his retinue, who like others of their kin before and after them acted as the memorialists of Norway's pre-literate history. In another paper discussing what the poets tell of St Ólaf's exploits in England, Turville-Petre shrewdly observes that, while the scalds throw 'little if any' light on the history of England, 'the history of England does throw some light on the poetry of the scalds',¹ and the corroboration offered encourages us to have faith in its transmission.

It was natural that Turville-Petre should think of making a textbook and anthology of scaldic verse; and it was a cause of much thankfulness to those of us concerned with Norse studies in the English-speaking world that he succeeded in doing so. His *Scaldic Poetry* was published by the Clarendon Press in 1976. In an 80-page introduction he selects precisely the right subjects to dwell on and writes with an easy mastery. He now comes down more firmly than before in favour of the idea that Celtic verse-forms must have exercised a vital influence on the genesis of *dróttkvætt*—at least he sees no plausible explanation of the syllable-counting of the scalds and their rule of fixed cadence save in the comparable features of Irish metres. If the introduction reflects his superior understanding, born of long experience and cultivation, the 100-page anthology may be said with equal justice to reflect his superior taste. He devotes a quarter of it to the poetry attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson and includes a new edition of the whole of his *Sonatorrek*, a great poem and a great monument which, despite textual obscurities, is not intrinsically difficult. He otherwise provides an excellent choice of verse from twenty-two poets, well calculated to intrigue the student without baffling him—Turville-Petre does not shrink from introducing stanzas with textual and interpretative difficulties, but their educative value is obvious. He provides a close English translation of each verse and a commentary, but commendably refrains from re-writing the words of the original in a prose order, as is commonly done even in Icelandic editions. He prefaces his selections with biographical sketches, where he naturally draws on saga-texts, assuming—perhaps rashly—that the reader is aware of the problems and uncertainties of such

¹ *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies, 1969*, edited by Hans Bekker-Nielsen (1970), 12.

story-telling. His verdicts on the poets as poets are memorable, deeply considered and by no means conventional.

It was probably a matter of taste and confirmed predilection that the anthology only covered the classical period from the beginnings of scaldic verse to the time of Haraldr harðráði, that is, only the first two of the art's five centuries of history. From Harald's time onwards scaldic verse chiefly developed in Icelandic isolation, and Turville-Petre did not much care for the post-classical, despite his enjoyment of the elaborate diction of some poets of the 'scaldic renaissance' in the twelfth century, Einarr Skúlason and Gamli kanóki in particular. He cared much less for the *rímur*, the branch of Icelandic poetry which in diction was the chief inheritor of the scaldic tradition and which flourished from the fourteenth century to the end of the nineteenth—not because of subject-matter, where he could stand a good deal of vulgarity, but because he found the rhythms trivial and the kennings hollow. He did not take much pleasure in the overwrought sentiment and underwrought form of ballads either. His standards were formed and maintained by poets like tenth-century Egill, craggy and passionate, loyal and tender, a great hater of a Norwegian king, and eleventh-century Þjóðólfr, brave and querulous, proud and touchy, a devoted follower of a Norwegian king—but both as poets dedicated to their art, uncorrupt and dignified in their craft.

All of Turville-Petre's books are major contributions to the world's general knowledge of Norse culture and classical Icelandic literature. They and his other writings also contain independent observations and theories of a kind that will always draw specialist scholars back to them, to weigh and check, reject, modify, confirm—chiefly, I believe, to confirm.

PETER FOOTE